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FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS POLÍTICAS Y SOCIOLOGÍA

Instituto de Investigaciones Feministas

TESIS DOCTORAL

THE CHANGING FACES OF WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH THE LENSES OF ACTIVIST ART AND ARTISTS

LAS CARAS CAMBIANTES DE LAS MUJERES EN LA INDIA, A TRAVÉS DE LAS LENTES DE ARTE Y ARTISTAS ACTIVISTAS

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR
PRESENTADA POR

SONIYA AMRITLAL PATEL

Bajo la dirección de la doctora

MARÍA ÁNGELES LÓPEZ FERNÁNDEZ

Madrid, 2020

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Dedicated to my mum; born in a time when women were mostly *looked at but not heard,* she lived and died in an endless struggle, never quite fulfilled…

To my dad, a most generous soul; his infinitely positive vision and insistence are what have brought this piece to be.

To my precious daughters Shanila and Ariadna; fruit of mixed cultures, they are blessed with unconditional love, liberty and richness without borders.

To my beloved husband Alfonso. Alongside my daughters, he sought a companion in life, they a mom, but instead endured the seemingly unending madness of *La Tesis.*

To my young nieces and nephews, Sophia, Sheila, Shivam, Dev, Rebeca, Luis, Salomé, Olivia, Rubén, Alexis and Enzo. Along with my daughters, they represent hope, paving the way already and moving towards a progressive, brighter, egalitarian future.

Cover Design: Soniya Patel

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RESUMEN

LAS CARAS CAMBIANTES DE LAS MUJERES EN LA INDIA, A TRAVÉS DE LAS LENTES DE ARTE Y ARTISTAS ACTIVISTAS

El objetivo principal de esta tesis es estudiar los cambios en la situación de la mujer en India a través de su representación en el arte y sus prácticas artísticas. Examino cómo podrían abordar cuestiones de empoderamiento, promover mejoras socioeconómicas y culturas progresistas. Parte de la premisa del poder del arte para forjar avances en las sociedades, tal como recoge Ernst Fischer en su ensayo *The Necessity of Art*.[1]

Analizo el impacto del trabajo de las artistas privilegiadas y rurales, y sus preocupaciones feministas y humanistas. Esta investigación empezó con dos exposiciones pioneras. *Tiger by the Tail! Women Artists of India Transforming Culture,* en el *Women's Studies Research Center*, Brandeis University, Boston;[2]

[1] Ver: (Fischer, 2010, p. 23)

[2] (Brandeis University, 2007)

casi coincidente con *Global Feminisms* en el museo de Brooklyn. Karen Kurczynski afirma: las dos exposiciones fueron las primeras intervenciones en romper con las hegemonías masculinas y occidentales en el arte contemporáneo global (Kurczynski, 2008).

Tiger by the Tail destacó nuevas tendencias feministas del arte contemporáneo de India. Las obras mostraban una conciencia y preocupación sobre asuntos de opresión social, agresión patriarcal, violencia comunal y discriminación de género, novedoso en la producción artística contemporánea del país. Exponían un cambio desde principio de los 80 en las prácticas artísticas de India. Había una gran presencia de mujeres artistas enfocando sus obras desde perspectivas de género en asuntos sociopolíticos, destacando cuestiones que eran pertinentes de India, y también de interés global.

Otro hecho que define los objetivos de esta investigación es que, a partir de 1990 las mujeres artistas en India empezaron a tener una presencia importantísima en el ámbito artístico nacional e internacional. Las artistas que lograban esta atención y reconocimiento son, mayormente, mujeres urbanas de las clases y castas altas, procedentes de familias de la élite con un poder adquisitivo elevadísimo. Son habitualmente mujeres cultas con títulos en diversas materias habiendo estudiado en las instituciones más prestigiosas de India y occidente. Tienen un gran reconocimiento nacional y mundial.

Actualmente, las obras de las artistas Indias más importantes se valoran en cientos de miles de dólares, incluso superan el millón de dólares.[3] Este hecho, en un país con una población de 1.340 millones y un sueldo medio anual de aproximadamente 2.020 dólares resulta impactante; casi inmoral. India ocupa el puesto 67 de 77 países, en la calificación de ingreso promedio anual del mundo.[4] El último estudio de Oxfam, de 2018, muestra una creciente desigualdad de riqueza y de género en India. Revela que el 1% de la población controla el 58% de la riqueza total del país, y que ese 1% se benefició del 73% de la riqueza total generada el año anterior. Es decir, el ejecutivo mejor pagado de una empresa importante tardaría 17.5 días en ganar lo que una trabajadora rural con el sueldo mínimo ganaría en 50 años de trabajo.[5]

Considerando lo anterior, planteo las cuestiones a investigar. Examino fundamentos históricos y antecedentes del feminismo en India. Estudio los movimientos y algunas figuras impulsores de reformas iniciales; intelectuales y líderes de la época pre y post independencia. Analizo el papel de la religión en la

[3] Ver: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/world/asia/01iht-letter01.html https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/india-s-8-most-expensive-contemporary-artists/

[4] https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php

[5] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/indias-richest-1-corner-73-of-wealth-generation-survey/articleshow/62598222.cms

cuestión de la mujer. Examino el contenido feminista y reivindicativo de algunas artistas, y sus actividades colaborativas con mujeres y artistas rurales. También estudio las vidas y trabajos de algunas artistas rurales, las características subversivas, los beneficios sociopolíticos y económicos de la producción de arte vernáculo para ellas y sus comunidades.

Respecto al objetivo principal de esta tesis: evaluar la situación cambiante de las mujeres en India examinando los resultados de las prácticas y colaboraciones entre artistas privilegiadas y rurales; podemos sacar las siguientes conclusiones.

Los movimientos iniciales y el consiguiente acceso a la educación promovieron cambios transcendentales. Dieron lugar a una mujer intelectual altamente empoderada; pero, implicó mayormente a las mujeres de las clases y castas altas. Ellas conforman el amplio espectro de la intelectualidad actual, las profesionales de todos los sectores, altamente capacitadas; las mujeres actualmente más influyentes en India.

Las mujeres indias ocupan diversos puestos en las artes. Son artistas, historiadoras, críticas de arte, comisarías, escritoras, académicas, gerentes de museos, etcétera. Han desafiado tendencias anteriores, estableciendo nuevas identidades dentro de marcos que, en algunos casos, también permiten la visibilidad y el empoderamiento de las mujeres menos privilegiadas y las artistas rurales.

Sin embargo, la gran mayoría de las artistas y mujeres exitosas siguen proviniendo de entornos originalmente muy favorecidos. No vemos movilidad ascendentes o avances entre las clases. Considerando las diferencias socioeconómicas, sin otros factores polarizadores, las narrativas reivindicativas de las artistas privilegiadas de ninguna manera consiguen su propósito.

La posición actual de las mujeres de las poblaciones y castas desfavorecidas plantea serias dudas sobre el enfoque, el énfasis o incluso el reconocimiento que el activismo ha ofrecido a los problemas de discriminación hacia ellas. El sistema de castas sigue profundamente arraigado en la cultura en todos los niveles. Ha sobrevivido a siglos de guerras, cataclismos políticos y sociales, logrando frustrar las enmiendas constitucionales destinadas específicamente a rebatir los prejuicios y la discriminación que causan.

Destaca la urgente responsabilidad por parte de las artistas privilegiadas de adoptar narrativas que conecten con las masas, un empeño por subvertir el comportamiento derivado de la cultura patriarcal. Requiere un aumento en la acción colaborativa no elitista, que se desenvuelva dentro del espacio ocupado por las masas. Entre los asuntos más problemáticos que sufre la sociedad india, está la violencia de género, directamente responsable del continuo desapoderamiento de la mujer, a pesar de la modernización y avances legislativos.

Paralelamente, el reconocimiento del valor del arte tradicional, hecho por mujeres, ha llevado a diversas iniciativas proactivas, financiadas por organizaciones privadas, no gubernamentales e instituciones gubernamentales.[6] Promocionan y mantienen vivas culturas y tradiciones artísticas, creando oportunidades para el empoderamiento y salidas de la pobreza extrema. Abren posibilidades hacia un futuro viable para muchas mujeres y sus familias. Permite que vendan su trabajo, establezcan pequeñas empresas y enseñen a las generaciones jóvenes. Dichas iniciativas resultan beneficiosas también para comunidades enteras. Con esas ayudas, fundadas en las iniciativas de personajes importantes de la historia reciente, muchas mujeres rurales logran la autoridad para cambiar sus realidades como individuos y también las de otras mujeres.

Indudablemente, quedan numerosos desafíos. El verdadero empoderamiento para la mayoría de las mujeres en India no está a la vista. En los tiempos desafiantes que se avecinan, no hay más remedio que seguir luchando, manteniendo la fe en la capacidad de *educar*, *organizar y agitar*, como el padre de la constitución de India, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, insistió tan vehementemente.

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[6] Ver: *Mithila Art Institute* - http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/Index

Mithilasmita - http://www.mithilasmita.com/

Aham Bhumika School - http://ahambhumika.org/

ABSTRACT

THE CHANGING FACES OF WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH THE LENSES OF ACTIVIST ART AND ARTISTS

The aim of this thesis is to study the changing status of women in India through their representation and practices in art. To evaluate how art practices of Indian women might be addressing empowerment, promoting socio-economic and progressive cultures. I base my arguments on the premise that art has the power to transform societies, as affirmed by Ernst Fischer in his essay *The Necessity of Art*.[7]

This thesis attempts to analyse the impact of privileged and rural artists practices, their feminist and humanist concerns. The study was inspired by two pioneering exhibitions. *Tiger by the Tail! Women Artists of India Transforming Culture,* held at the *Women's Studies Research Center*, Brandeis University, Boston;[8] almost coincidental with *Global Feminisms* in the Brooklyn museum.

[7] See: (Fischer, 2010, p. 23)

[8] (Brandeis University, 2007)

Karen Kurczynski asserts: the two exhibitions were the first to break masculine and western hegemonies in global contemporary art (Kurczynski, 2008).

Tiger by the Tail highlighted new feminist tendencies in contemporary Indian art, presenting an awareness and concern about issues of social oppression, patriarchal aggression, communal violence and gender discrimination not seen previously in Indian contemporary practices. It represented a change that had begun in the early 80s; the significant presence of women artists whose works address socio-political questions from a gender perspective, highlighting issues that are relevant to India, and also of global interest.

Another deriving factor in establishing the objectives of this study is the fact that since the 1990s there has been an increasing presence of main stream Indian women artists nationally and worldwide. The women artists who achieve such acclaim and recognition are mostly urban women from upper and middle classes and castes. They hail from decidedly elite and privileged backgrounds, are usually highly educated with degrees in various subjects and have studied in the most prestigious institutions in India and the west. Therefore, they are eminently renowned, exhibiting worldwide.

Currently, the artworks of the most important Indian women artists are valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars, even exceeding one million dollars.[9]

[9] https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/world/asia/01iht-letter01.html

(continuación de la nota al pie)

This fact, in a country with a population of 1,340 million and an average annual salary of $2,020 is shocking to the point of immoral.[10] India is currently ranked 67 out of 77 countries, in the world average annual income index. Additionally, Oxfam's latest study, from 2018, shows growing inequality of wealth and gender in India. It reveals that 1% of the population controls 58% of the country's wealth, and that this 1% benefited from 73% of the wealth generated the previous year.[11] That is, the highest paid executive of an important company would take 17.5 days to earn what a rural worker with the minimum wage would earn in 50 years of work.

The facts just outlined establish the questions appraised in this thesis. I examine the background and historical foundations of feminism in India. I study the activism and actions of some of the most important proponents of early reforms; intellectuals and leaders pre and post-independence. I analyse the role of religion in the women's question. I study the work and practices of a selection of elite artists, evaluating the feminist and socio-political content of their work, and

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https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/india-s-8-most-expensive-contemporary-artists/

[10] https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php

[11] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/indias-richest-1-corner-73-of-wealth-generation-survey/articleshow/62598222.cms

their collaborative activities with artists from rural areas. I also study the lives and works of a selection of rural artists, the subversive tendencies of vernacular art production, and the socio-political, economic and cultural benefits that this foments for them and their communities.

Regarding the main objective of this thesis: to assess the changing status of Indian women by examining the outcome of art practices, narratives and collaborations between privileged and rural women artists; We can draw the following conclusions.

Early movements and the subsequent access to education stimulated transcendental changes, creating a highly empowered women intelligentsia. However, these advances involved almost exclusively women from the upper classes and castes, who now make up the broad spectrum of exceptionally empowered intellectuals, business women and skilled professionals from all sectors; unquestionably the most influential women in India today.

Today Indian women occupy numerous positions in the arts. They are artists, historians, art critics, curators, writers, academics, museum managers, and etcetera. They have challenged cultural narratives, establishing new identities within frameworks that, in some cases, also allow for the visibility and empowerment of less privileged women and women in vernacular art production.

However, what is painfully clear is that the vast majority of highly successful women in India continue to hail from highly privileged origins. There is scarce evidence of upward mobility or advances between classes. Considering

the continued socio-political and economic disparities affecting most women in India today, excluding other polarizing factors, the subversive practices of privileged women artists in no way achieves their purpose.

The current situation of women from marginalized populations and castes raises serious questions about the approach, emphasis or even recognition that activism has offered to the problems of discrimination towards them. The caste system remains engrained in Indian culture at all levels. It has survived centuries of war, political and social cataclysms; managing to thwart the constitutional amendments specifically directed at countering the prejudices and discrimination it causes.

There is the dire need and responsibility on the part of privileged women artists to adopt measures and narratives that achieve effective connections with the masses, rather than mere elitist discourse. An urgent all-encompassing conscientious determination to undermine behaviours derived from longstanding patriarchal cultures is called for. A significant increase in non-elitist collaborative artistic action that develops within the space occupied by the masses is required. Amongst the most problematic issues suffered by Indian society is gender violence; directly responsible for the continued disempowerment of women, despite modernization and legislative advances.

On the other hand, recognition of the value of traditional art productions made by women has led to various proactive initiatives, funded by private and non-governmental organizations, and government institutions.[12] These support and maintain artistic cultures and traditions alive, creating opportunities out of extreme poverty and towards empowerment. They open up possibilities towards a viable future for many women and their families, allowing them to sell their work, establish small businesses and teach younger generations. These initiatives are also beneficial for entire communities. Therefore, through these endeavours inspired by the initiatives of important figures of recent history, many rural women are acquiring the authority to change their realities as individuals and also those of other women.

Undoubtedly, numerous unresolved challenges remain. True empowerment for most Indian women is nowhere in sight. The evidently challenging times of current India imply that people have no choice but to continue the fight, maintaining faith in the people's ability to *educate*, *organize and agitate*, as the father of India's constitution, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar so vehemently insisted.

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[12] See: *Mithila Art Institute* - http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/Index

Mithilasmita - http://www.mithilasmita.com/

Aham Bhumika School - http://ahambhumika.org/

INTRODUCTION

> The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are.
>
> My own definition of feminist is: Feminist: a man or a woman who says, "Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it, we must do better.
>
> (Adichie, 2009)

RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND OBJECTIVES

In accordance with the purpose of this study, as laid out in this proposal, a concise statement of the main aims alongside the parts in which the various objectives have been examined can be found at the end of this section.

The issues to be examined in this study are diverse, but crucial to achieving a reasonably comprehensive picture of the evolving and current state of affairs in India, as concerns artistic practices, feminism and women. The main intention of this study is to assess how the creative pursuits of women artists and contemporary art practice in India might be addressing questions of feminist and

humanistic concerns at both national and international levels in what is clearly an increasingly globalized cultural setup. In order to achieve this I shall analyse the different narratives of art in today's India by examining the work of a series of women artists from both the cities and rural backgrounds.

This necessarily also requires a somewhat in-depth examination of the current position and relatively recent developments of discourse on the topic of traditional or ethnic folk art; much of which is produced by women. Additionally, and specifically within the rural settings, the questions and issues that are faced by both artists and whole communities due to globalization as well as inappropriate implementation of cultural and intellectual property rights will also be examined.

In order to correctly assess the situation of women in India at present, one would also have to study the evolution of feminist discourse and art practice over the last decades, comparing and contrasting global versus international or transnational feminism theories. Analysing and documenting the varying manners and directions in which feminist art practice and visual culture are headed, and the possible manners in which these elements might be providing alternative realities and narratives that benefit empowerment, gender expectations, cultural practices and conventional wisdom, amongst distinct classes both in urban and rural communities, is also part of what this study strives to achieve. Specifically, there is a dire need to explore and analyse the different ramifications and the use of feminist artistic practice in India as an agent of change.

Additionally, in a country such as India, a study of this character cannot be carried out without examining the historical role and status of women within the contexts of religion, society and the nationalist struggle for independence. As an undergraduate fine arts student at the University of Nigeria, I observed what was at the time a clear dearth in studies dedicated specifically to the practice of art by women. Thus began my initial interest in women's studies and gender issues. Further down the road, I gradually began to immerse myself in literature on feminist theory, art practices and movements, as well as the socio-political significance and power of art created by women. My exposure to theories and discourse while carrying out research in fulfilment of the course requirements for *Deconstrucción de Criterios Artisticos: Resignificación de las Mujeres en el Arte*; imparted by Dr Marián López Fernández Cao;[13] further added to an increasing engagement towards the study of art practices by women, as well as feminist critical theory and discourse.

At the time, also inspired by the arguments and theories of Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, Rozsika Parker, Maria R. Witzling, Whitney Chadwick, and Germaine Greer, amongst others, I developed an interest in studying the Spanish situation and had originally thought of researching further within that

[13] Patel, S.A (1995) Relación Entre el Art, La Publicidad y El Cuerpo Humano. *Unpublished document.* Madrid: Universidad Complutense.

area, making that the focus of my thesis.[14] However, the moment also coincided with the fact that Indian contemporary art and women artists in particular had begun to attract significant international attention. As such, I also began to cultivate an interest in the varied debates by art critics and scholars regarding the relationship of western feminist theory with feminist movements and postcolonial theory in India and how this might be influencing contemporary art practice and visual culture in the country. Meanwhile, a chance meeting with Fatima Cofan, and conversations with Dr Marián López Fernández Cao, helped shape my decision to go back to my own roots; which in all its complexity and vastness has also proved to be infinitely exciting and challenging to me.

Being of Indian origin, and with the benefit of knowledge acquired through childhood exposure and first-hand experience of Indian society, culture and arts, it made sense to strive to explore the Indian situation and landscape. The fact that since India's independence in 1947, there has been an intensely active, evolving and dynamic art market, with women more and more at the forefront, as well as the phenomenal international interest and acclaim that contemporary Indian artists have been enjoying for some time now, served to seal this decision.

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[14] Panorámica Del Arte Español Actual Realizado Por Mujeres . *Unpublished document.* Madrid: Universidad Complutense (PATEL, 1995).

As stated previously, this study aims to explore the effects of the creative pursuits of women artists and contemporary art practice in India on many of the unresolved feminist and humanistic concerns of both national and international significance within an increasingly globalized cultural setup. In order to achieve this I shall look at the different narratives of art in India by examining the work of three rural women artists, a select group of urban artists and artistic groups as well as a select number of mainstream contemporary women artists, who as a result of their personal experiences and immensely critical vision have made significant contributions to intellectual discourse, both within India and on the International arena; be it feminist, post-colonial, modernism, postmodernism or all of the above. I hope to be able to probe how these diverse practices are addressing sociocultural, political, economic as well as racial and gender questions within the above context.

At the risk of using too many quotes, in order to highlight the evolving trends in contemporary feminist art practice in India, I would like to cite from Brandeis University online newsletter, in reference to the then upcoming exhibition titled: *"Tiger by the Tail! Women Artists of India Transforming Culture,* This fall, the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University will host an exhibition of contemporary Indian art that challenges social oppression and gender discrimination, and provides new models for the empowerment of women" (Brandeis University, 2007, p. para.1).

In the same article one goes on to read, “Much of the work responds to on-going patriarchal aggression and communal violence in India” (Brandeis University, 2007, p. para. 2). Further ahead in the article, co-curator of the exhibit, Dr Elinor Gadon states: “One of the most significant developments over the last 30 years has been the emerging prominence of self-conscious female artists willing to challenge social norms” (Gadon, 2007, p. para.3). The article also goes on to say, “The title of the exhibit, *Tiger by the Tail!* refers to Indian women who claim their agency and speak out, shining a spotlight on some of the most important issues for women in contemporary society, not just in India, but globally” (Brandeis University, 2007, p. para. 4). And, still within the same article one can also read the words of art critic and co-curator, Roobina Karode: “The artworks are culturally specific and address the current and historical concerns within the Indian context, [...] at the same time they resonate with global concerns and introduce a woman’s subjectivity, which has been excluded from Indian art until now” (Karode, 2007, p. para.5).

This was just one of a vast number of major exhibitions that have been held both nationally and globally; pertinent of a highly prolific practice that has provided copious material for intellectual debate, exchange and discourse amongst curators, artists, feminists, historians, cultural theorists, critics and anyone else interested in the subject. As also outlined at the beginning of this chapter, in order to be able to analyse these developments with some lucidity, it makes sense to examine the evolution of feminist discourse and art practice over

the last decades, comparing and contrasting global versus international or transnational feminism theories.

On writing about the inaugural exhibition of the *Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art*, at the Brooklyn Museum, jointly curated by Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly in March 2007, Reilly states that the spotlight of the exhibition was not a scrutiny of "US feminist art," (Reilla, 2010, p. 156), but instead, an inquiry into "Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art, on feminist art worldwide." (Reilla, 2010, p. 156). With this perspective in mind, they embarked on challenging what they considered to "be still a Western-centric art system" (Reilla, 2010, p. 156). Adhering to this line of thought, I would that this thesis takes the shape of an inquiry into the multiple stories and tendencies in contemporary feminist art, specifically in the context of modern India, encompassing mainstream and urban artists as well as rural women artists and their vernacular or traditional practices, alongside a subtle backdrop of literature and theatre.

Additionally, as already elaborated, a study of this character cannot be carried out without examining the historical role and status of women in India, within the contexts of religion, society and the nationalist struggle for independence. Even today, in 21st century India, with its open and free markets, and a population inexorably exposed to a limitless array of cultural influences on an increasingly globalised stage, alongside cutting edge information and communication technology; religion and religious fervour dominate, playing an

enormously prominent and monumental role in shaping the majority of society, customs, behaviour, politics and *Ways of Seeing***,** to borrow John Berger`s famous line, (Berger, Sven, Fox, Dibb, & Hollis, 1972). This can be seen to be true in the majority of cases, as much amongst the educated elite and middle classes as the impoverished, often illiterate working and marginalized classes.[15]

Ample evidence of the dictatorial power of religious beliefs which define cultural practices in India can be found from several sources. To mention just one, I refer to an article in *The Guardian* by Monica Sarkar titled "Feminism for goddesses: does *Kumari* worship empower girls?" (Sarkar M. , 2014). The article outlines details of annual Hindu festivals which last several days both in India and Nepal. The article debates whether the practice of goddess worship could translate into girl empowerment. As is clearly indicated by the author, the

[15] This is a reality that I have experienced throughout my childhood, coming from a privileged, upper middle class, Indian family. Both my parents were academics. As a child I lived and studied in Europe, Africa and India. I travelled extensively in Africa, Europe and the United States, visiting and staying with relatives. Irrespective of which country we were visiting, we always lived within the norms and expectations of the traditional Indian culture within an expatriate Indian society. There were always clearly laid out religious, cultural and gender expectations, with little room for questioning or debate. Having also relatives in New Zealand and Canada, and having also spent long stretches of time with them, it is evident that the same reality can be seen to apply to the majority of Indians, irrespective of where they live.

unquestionable answer to this is a clear negative. An example of this paradox is demonstrated by the Indian advertising agency *Taproot*. In September 2013, Taproot carried out an *Abused Goddesses* campaign, where posters of Hindu goddesses showing evidence of abuse through bruised faces and eyes were published. See: FIGURE - 1.

The aim of the campaign according to its producers was to outline the contradiction and hypocrisy of deity worship and the reality of high female infanticide and the treatment of girls and women in modern India. Whether the campaign – which went viral within hours of its release – was successful in its proposed intent or simply created a form of *cheap tokenism* (Tilak, 2013), is another question. However, what continues to be clear is that according to the figures quoted in Sarkar's article, there were "244,270 incidents of crimes against women recorded in 2012" (Sarkar M. , 2014, p. para.3).

The article goes on to quote professor of religion, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, in her book, *When the World Becomes Female*. In referring to the *Gangamma festival*, as (cited in Sarkar, 2014, para. 4), Burkhalter asks: "Where do we get the idea that because there are goddesses, women will have higher status?" (Sarkar M. , 2014).

FIGURE - 1

The Taproot agency's *Abused Goddesses* advertisement recreated images of the Indian goddesses *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi* & *Durga* (also known as the goddess *Ambika* or *Ambe Maa*) shown above respectively in their mythological settings; using live models and the caption: "Pray that we never see this day. Today more than 68% of women in India are victims of domestic violence. Tomorrow it seems that no woman will be spared, not even ones we pray to. SAVE OUR SISTERS". (Jha, 2013); (India Today, 2013).
Retrieved from: https://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/indias-incredibly-powerful-abused-goddesses-campaign-condemn

The article also outlines the findings of many NGOs which indicate that adverse cultural practices are camouflaged using religion. An example of the infamous practice of *Devadasi* is mentioned. In the ritual of Devadasi, – literal translation: *servant of god* (Kidron, 2011) – girls as young as ten are forced into

prostitution sanctioned by religious figures, their parents and whole communities. They are first of all ceremoniously initiated into the service of the goddess *Yellamma*; which euphemistically translates into being forced into lifelong sexual slavery. They are thus condemned for life, to sexual enslavement and violence, never having the opportunity to exercise choice; be it regarding sexual partners, marriage, family or any other decision that most of us take for granted; much less of course, the possibility of partaking in any bread winning means other than that of prostitution. Once they are older and no longer serve in their role as sexual playthings, they are abandoned to a fate of begging. (Kidron, 2011).

After the findings of a study conducted by Aasha Ramesh in 1981 in the *Joint Women's programme*, (as cited in Sarkar, 2014, para. 9), the practice of Devadasi was banned by the Indian government. However, (as cited in Sarkar, 2014), to quote Ms Ramesh: "Unfortunately, we know that laws alone cannot change practices that have been existing since time immemorial, especially if it involves a religious belief" (Ramesh, 2014, p. para.).

In order to be able to demonstrate the existence of many diverse and contrasting realities to this *single story*; to use the famous expression by the acclaimed Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a *TED* talk given in 2009, (Adichie, 2009); I would like to draw on a paper written by Dr Ampat V. Varghese, academic dean of *Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology* in Bangalore. The paper presents various alternative realities that clearly also abound in the India of today. Eighty percent of the student population in Srishti,

(Varghese, n.d), a private design school in Bangalore, is female. They are the privileged daughters of parents from diverse cultural backgrounds, who are also urban, sophisticated and elite. They have had the opportunity (Varghese, n.d), of studying in the best private schools and have been exposed to the wealth of cultural sensibilities of the aristocracy as well as the nouveau rich, upper middle classes.

The liberal arts curriculum at Srishti appears to be very well grounded, exposing its students to both Indian and foreign women artists as well as feminist critical theory and experimental art practices. Through this exposure, it would be fair to assume that students, very early in their studies, begin to develop a well-rounded awareness of feminist histories and processes as well as the capacity of independent, critical thought and judgement. However, it would also be safe to assume that it is also the students' privileged backgrounds which give them the confidence and opportunities to question the status quo while becoming makers and shapers of their own destinies and culture.

As such, a somewhat comprehensive exploration of the manner in which feminist art practice and visual culture is developing, while approaching and addressing the myriad elements of the immensely complex fabric and varied realities of the Indian social, cultural, religious and political contexts; as globalization and free markets reign full force, is part of what this study hopes to achieve. Finally, within the above context, there is the imperative and dire need to examine the current position and recent developments of discourse on the topic of

traditional or ethnic folk art; much of which is produced by women. According to Julia Marchand, “The ethnocentric discourse that has followed Indian vernacular art is making way for a more appropriate and acceptable way of defining the artwork of the “tribal and folk community” (Marchand, 2012, p. para.1).

There has been much debate over the last few years, regarding the temporality, identity and visual culture of so called tribal or folk artists; referring to the traditional art and artists of rural communities and villages, who have been largely anonymous and invisible up until quite recently. The general consensus amongst scholars is that the artists involved were generally given short shrift and relegated to the back seats of art history, analysis and curatorial discourse. This effectively neutralized the temporality, classification and visibility of this particular art form, in which one can see clear evidence of extremely forceful and vibrant creative energy.

It is clear that Indian traditional art forms are highly distinctive and widely recognizable worldwide; and that there have been numerous random exhibitions and displays of this type of traditional art in spaces both within the country and abroad. However, it would appear that up until relatively recently, they did not provoke significant intellectual following or debate amongst scholars, certainly not regarding the positioning of such art in the modern and postmodern contexts. This might possibly be due to the type of spaces where they have traditionally been shown, as well as a simple lack of qualified and professional curatorial undertaking and sufficient media and critical intellectual coverage. As Annapurna

Garimella states in her essay, *Do What You Will: Identity Exhibitions and Contemporary Indian Vernacular Art*, the shaping of identity as well as the perception and positioning within modernity in the field of art, depends as much on the presentation and representation of this art in exhibitions and museums as on the actual art practice and the resulting pieces, (Garimella, 2011).

The first debates about the positioning of folk art within Indian modernism were initiated by the artist Jagdish Swaminathan and the cultural critic Jyotindra Jain in the 1980s. These questioned the institutional classification into anthropological frameworks and neglect of folk and tribal art by the art world. (Jhaveri, 2005). During that period, Jangarh Singh Shyam, a villager who trained as an artist at the *Bharat Bhavan* in Bhopal, under the tutelage of J. Swaminathan, started a style of folk painting which would later become a movement to be followed by other rural artists. His work involved "colourful depictions of goddesses, animals and beautiful trees" (Marchand, 2012, p. para.6).

In 1995, (as cited in Hoskote, 2009), Nancy Adajani, cultural theorist and curator once again sharply focused attention on the subject of rural or vernacular art, by raising questions regarding the definition and interpretation of *folk* and *tribal* arts; in an international symposium titled *Should the Crafts Survive?* The work of artists, who followed the style of painting originally initiated by Jangarh Singh Shyam, was exhibited in two galleries in Mumbai in 2009, under the denomination of *Gond Art or Jangarh Kalam*. In the exhibition catalogue, Ranjit Hoskote, the cultural theorist, refused to use the term *tribal* when referring to the

pieces on display and instead alludes to them as belonging "to that emergent third field of artistic production in contemporary Indian culture which is neither metropolitan nor rural, neither (post)modernist nor traditional" (Hoskote, 2009, p. 1). Essentially, the questions which were raised by Jagdish Swaminathan and Jyotindra Jain in the 1980s are now being readdressed by cultural theorists and curators who attempt to find new frameworks of Indian contemporary art, inclusive of traditional rural art forms that had previously been marginalized by art history and discourse.

Between November 2010 and June 2011, a two part exhibition titled *Vernacular, in the Contemporary* curated by *Jackfruit Research and Design* and Annapurna Garimella, opened its doors to scholars and the public, at the *Devi Art Foundation* in Gurgaon, south of New Delhi. This ground-breaking show comprising of approximately sixty commissioned pieces of painting and sculpture (Garimella, 2011), as well as works from the *Lekha* and *Anupam Poddar* collection, effectively managed to thrust the question of the position and temporality of vernacular art within the global art world, to the forefront of contemporary Indian art discourse, (Garimella, 2011).

Vernacular in the Contemporary was followed by a major online auction in August 2012, showcasing what was still termed, ***Indian Folk and Tribal Art and Objects.*** This was the first of two of such events so far, organised by *Saffronart*, the Indian equivalent of Sotheby's or Christie's, (Nag, 2012). It is worth noting that for the first time, the artists involved received intellectual property rights and

recognition, by having their names displayed alongside their work. Traditionally, as is well known, the art produced by rural artists is not signed by them, but is recognised as belonging to the whole community or pertaining to the area from which the artist originates.

The questions and issues that are faced by both artists and whole communities due to globalization as well as inappropriate implementation of cultural and intellectual property rights will be examined further on in this study. On browsing the auction figures of Saffronart, it is worth noting that the winning bids which practically all the pieces fetched were significantly higher than the lower estimate expected by the auction house; in fact, many far surpassed the highest estimated amount, (Saffronart, 2012). Saffronart went on to have another online auction in February 2013, this produced even higher bids and sales than the last one.

Following the line of inquiries outlined above:

My original contribution to existing discourse and knowledge will be, on the one hand, an attempt to explore and highlight the evolving status of Indian women through empowering trends and the multiple narratives and elements of feminist art practice in India, while on the other hand, also focusing on the alliances and collaborations which have developed and are on-going between urban and rural women artists. I hope to contribute towards analysing and documenting the varying manners and directions in which feminist art practice and

visual culture are headed. Through an inquiry into evolving gender representations in literature and the arts, and the manners in which these may be providing alternative realities and narratives that benefit empowerment, gender expectations, cultural practices and conventional wisdom amongst the distinct castes and classes, both in urban and rural communities. To borrow the famous humanist artist William Kelly's query, the question posed here is whether Indian "arts real concern is humanity" (Kelly, 2003, p. 111).

To recapitulate briefly, this study strives to explore and analyse the different ramifications of both urban and rural art practices by women. Within this context, how the use of feminist artistic practice in India and the practice of traditional arts and crafts by rural women artists function as agents of change and empowerment. Women involved in traditional art practices in rural regions have the potential to contribute not only towards their personal empowerment, but also towards enrichment and empowerment of other women and the whole community; even while they do not attest to or recognise feminist intent in their work. Meanwhile, it is also clear that mainstream artists, through their work, hold extremely powerful reigns with which to drive consciousness and advocate basic rights, influence public opinion, alter cultural stereotypes and address critical humanitarian questions.

Contemporary art practice attains even greater value by functioning as a collaborative entity with the aim of triggering awareness and the questioning of established conventional culture and power politics. In the words of Pitika Ntuli:

"Is art to bear witness to its time as some writers suggest? If so, what will artists witness [...]? [...] will the artist protest against these? Will the artist suggest an alternative vision?" (Ntuli, 1999, p. 53). To borrow Picasso's statement (as cited in Kelly, 2003, p. 117), "[...] a painting can never stop a bullet," to which Kelly argues, "[...] although a painting can never stop a bullet; a painting can stop a bullet from being fired" (Kelly, 2003, p. 117).

As stated at the beginning of this proposal, a summary of the main aims and consequent secondary objectives of this study, alongside the chapters in which they are addressed, would be as follows:

The primary aim of this thesis is to carry out an appraisal of the changing status of women in India, by examining how the creative pursuits of contemporary and traditional art practices by both mainstream and rural women artists might be addressing questions of empowerment and leading to cultural advancement and reformist outcomes. The inquiry is carried out bearing in mind feminist and humanist concerns, relevant within both national and international contexts as a result of increasingly globalized economic and sociocultural influences. The questions generated by the above inquiry have been addressed as objectives as per a set of secondary aims which are studied in the following order.

1 - An examination of Hinduism – as the predominant religion in India – and Hindu goddesses, as a backdrop to both historical and existing roles and status

of women, within the contexts of religion and society; alongside the developments and effects of movements culminating in the nationalist struggle for independence is to be found in **Parts 1 and 2.**

2 - **Parts 2, 3 and 4** include an appraisal of early movements, prior and post-independence, alongside developing trends in the narratives of art practises through an examination of the status and work of socialist and nationalist reformers, writers as well as artists from the cities and rural areas.

3 - Evolving feminist discourse in India and art practices post-independence have been examined by comparing and contrasting global versus international or transnational feminism as represented in and by the work of the first mainstream, modern or contemporary women in the arts and artists in **Part 3**.

4 - **Part 4** examines the current position and relatively recent developments in discourse within the areas of traditional or vernacular art, much of which is produced by women. This part specifically explores the work of the activists and promoters of the traditional arts of India and three vernacular women artists; examining also the significance and influences of their practices, in terms of empowerment, for rural woman in general and upon the discourse regarding boundaries and definitions of contemporary art in India.

5 - **Parts 5 and 6** explore the multiple narratives within feminist art practices by focusing on two contemporary main stream artists, public and community artistic ventures, as well as the alliances and collaborations which have developed and are in some cases on-going between urban and rural women artists. As such, **Parts 4, 5 and 6** in conjunction, explore the women and in some cases men involved in the diverse ramifications of intentional and inadvertently feminist artistic practices, through a study of three rural or vernacular artists, two mainstream contemporary artists and a selection of urban artists and artistic groups, amongst other organisations.

6 - The conclusion presents a series of answers to the questions posed in the next section, through brief overviews of ongoing and developing trends as regards women in general, as well as women in the arts; while also opening up suggestions of areas for future research that have fallen outside the scope of this study due to theme and time constraints.

> Labels in philosophy and cultural discourse have the character that Derrida ascribes to Plato's pharmakon, (Derrida, 1968, as cited in Bernstein, 1982, p. 353):
>
> They can poison and kill, and they can remedy and cure. We need them to help identify a style, a temperament, a set of common concerns and emphases, or a vision that has a determinate shape. But we must also be wary of the ways in which they can blind us, or can reify what is fluid and changing.
>
> (Bernstein, 1982, p. 353).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE

Based on the primary aim and objectives of this study, as laid out in the previous chapter, a concise outline of the main consequent questions to be addressed, alongside the parts or sections in which these have been focused on, can be found at the end of this section.

The assumption that in many cases, contemporary art practices increasingly involve pushing the limits of the role and responsibility of art, into tools with which to explore, contest and voice dissidence, thus contributing in some ways as agents of change can be argued as being fairly evident. The Art practice of contemporary India has become increasingly multidisciplinary and collaborative

over the years; addressing issues that can be considered to be of vital interest and importance within the political, social, economic and humanitarian context in which the artists find themselves. Examining the creative journey of women activists, women's movements and mainstream as well as rural artists women artists of India, is part of the venture in which this study is involved. Amongst the women studied here there are those who may or may not consider themselves to be feminists in the Indian context; however, my interest is in analysing the spread of knowledge through their practices as effective subversive tools and strategies of intervention against situations of patriarchal bias, religious fundamentalism and gender inequality, amongst others;

The empowerment of rural women through their artistic ventures, which also significantly contribute to the Indian economy, is a fact that one could be forgiven for assuming as being obvious and straightforward. Thus, an examination of the subversion, evolution, development and the current status of these women, in the face of numerous obstacles comprised of religious, social, economic, class and cultural bias and barriers is certainly called for. Equally significant would be an analysis of the state and results of collaborative work amongst rural and urban artists, as well as the general public, in the ongoing effort to create an alternative narrative for the majority of women in India.

As outlined previously, the birth of Feminist Standpoint theory in the 1970s highlighted the vital importance of location, specifically the recognition and understanding of the unique and particular social and historical locations of

women as vital factors in knowledge production. This study attempts take into account the specific location of Indian women of different regions, castes and classes in understanding the women's question in India; from the point of view of a *Southern Feminist*, to borrow Devaki Jain's expression. However, one must bear in mind that the distinction of global North and South knowledge is not free of controversy, as neither are any of the terms coined to describe women's quest for recognition and empowerment; thus, even while acknowledging the problematics and deficiencies of these categorisations, I strive to address this study through an approach appropriate to the postcolonial and globalization context which spans *Transnational Feminism*[16] and *Feminism without Borders*[17].

In April 1983, an international conference called *Common Differences, Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives* was held at the University of Illinois. The idea to host an international conference for multiracial women was the brain child of the feminist intellectual, Professor Ann Russo and the eminent postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Lourdes Torres, Professor of Latin American and Latino Studies was also on the organising committee. The conference was amongst the first to bring together women from the third world countries, women of colour and white women, in discussions, dialogue and solidarity that "called into question the very term of *feminism*" (Mohanty, Russo,

[16] See: (Adams & Thomas, 2010); (McLaren, 2017)

[17] (Mohanty C. T., 2003)

& Torres, 1991, p. ix); thus permanently changing, in fundamental ways, the discourse on feminism and *Common Differences* – the title of the conference was borrowed from the path breaking study by Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis regarding the increasing variations and differences in perspectives and concerns of black and white women's movements.

Third world remains a much contested and criticised label; however, within the context of the conference for the organisers and participants, it appeared more acceptable than the usage of *postcolonial* or *developing*, also of common usage within these contexts. Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. clarify that

> Third world refers to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black Asian, Latino and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia. Thus the term does not merely indicate a hierarchal cultural and economic relationship between *first* and *third* world countries; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonisation and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between first and third world peoples (Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991, p. x).

Cheryl Johnson-Odim further clarifies that the phrase includes populations, countries and even continents that are considered underdeveloped and over exploited as well as the people from these regions who are currently resident in

developed First World countries (Johnson-Odim, 1991). The conference gathered over 150 speakers with an attendance of up to 2000 people and what became clear was that the stories recounted and the tracing of histories regarding antiimperialist and antiracist struggles by women from all over the world converted the term *third world* itself into a term that denoted empowerment.

However, scholarly engagement with the history of feminism outside the west is apparently relatively reduced. Studies that trace the struggles of women from third world or the Global South and their role and status are many, but this scholarship does not always address questions of feminist historiography or how women from diverse historical and sociocultural backgrounds define their relationship to feminism and feminist movements. In many cases, – as shall be made clear as we progress in this study, – many women from India, even while engaging in obviously feminist struggles, reject the label of feminist, interpreting the term as a narrow definition tied to concepts that they do not feel are common to their particular struggle. This dilemma is played out equally amongst women from other third world countries. It is common knowledge that Pulitzer Prize writer, Alice Walker chooses to use the term *womanist* instead of feminist, in her ground breaking collection, *In search of Our Mothers' Gardens;* as a person who she defines as "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

As has been made clear, many third world women perceive the feminism that has emerged from the white, middleclass western women as being an almost

singularly antisexist struggle, while for third world women, according to Johnson-Odim, "gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary locus of oppression […]. Thus, a narrowly defined feminism, taking the eradication of gender discrimination as the route to ending women's oppression, is insufficient to redress the oppression of Third World women," (Johnson-Odim, 1991, p. 315). As a result, despite attempts by many feminist intellectuals to expand the term and definitions of feminism to include issues that drive third world women, as Johnson-Odim asserts, "it remains a challenge […] to construct definitions of feminism that allow for autonomy and that are of immediate relevance in feminist struggles in various parts and yet have the breath needed for the widest consensus and cooperation" (Johnson-Odim, 1991, p. 315).

Equally pertinent within the focus of this study are the issues highlighted by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who outlines the dire necessity for antiracist feminism in today's world, in order to address the bid for economic and social justice in this century (Mohanty C. T., 2003). As Mohanty points out, the twentieth century witnessed the growth and development of awareness, concepts and movements of feminism as well as the decolonization of the south or third world. However, the twentieth century also bore testimony to the ascent as well as the fall of communist second world regions, and unquestionably, the recolonization by capitalism of the vast majority of the entire world. Simultaneously, there are ongoing and increasing tendencies of strengthened nationalist, religious and ethnic fundamentalism. As such, even while feminist

ideas and movements have gained ground, they are facing increasingly aggressive challenges and threats. Chandra Talpade Mohanty states that a social and economically just feminist politics requires clear comprehension of the fact that,

> […] being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our economic and social marginality and/or privilege. It would require recognizing that sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and (supposedly justified) violence against women. The interwoven processes of sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism are an integral part of our social fabric, wherever in the world we happen to be. We need to be aware that these ideologies, in conjunction with the regressive politics of ethnic nationalism and capitalist consumerism, are differentially constitutive of all of our lives […] (Mohanty C. T., 2003, p. 3).

The response to this situation requires not only ongoing clear analysis and unwavering exposure of the damaging behaviour and attitudes of politicians and institutions that work towards maintaining prejudicial ideologies, but also inclusive feminism that applies antiracist feminism structures build upon decolonisation, clear anticapitalistic critiques and solidarity that is both political and ethical in character. A significant part of this study attempts to examine and clarify the historical trends and background of feminism and the women's

movement in India. Feminism in India is a relatively recently accepted term to describe activism as far as many Indian women are concerned. Exploring the diverse movements from pre-independence to current times, as a way of assessing the women's question, as it stands today in India is part of the concerns of this study.

The 19th century witnessed the first women's movement which began essentially as a social reform movement and evolved into the nationalist independence or freedom movement against British rule; and was shaped by both issues. Post-independence witnessed movements concerned with issues of poverty reduction and girls' education, as well as the child brides, dowry, women's labour and property rights. Amongst the most significant achievements of the Indian women's movement were the guarantee of equal rights for women by India's constitution and universal suffrage rights for adults. However, in most cases, women did not experience any significant social changes in their lives, post-independence.

The 1970s witnessed a new women's movement that articulated issues that affected the masses as well as marginalised groups and lower castes. Numerous individuals and organisations took up many of the issues that directly and indirectly concerned these women, including the rights of marginalized castes like the Dalits. However, recent years have also witnessed increased fundamentalism and attacks on acquired rights. Many Women's Studies Centres responsible for

drawing the spotlight on women's issues and concerns are witnessing drastic cuts in funding and are as such seriously threatened with disappearance.[18]

[18] See: https://indianexpress.com/article/education/why-is-the-government-threatened-by-womens-studies-centres-in-indian-universities/
https://thewire.in/education/new-ugc-guidelines-may-cut-funding-for-womens-studies-centres-across-india
https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/180717/womens-studies-centres-may-shut-soon-in-india.html

Through this study I strive to trace the evolution and history of feminist practices in India that have shaped the *women's question* since the socialist movement in the late nineteenth century, when the subject of the women's question was first broached and the first waves of feminist movements of the 1920s and 30s to the present.

By feminist practice in this context I include feminism at diverse levels in accordance with eminent scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty's outline of feminist practice as operating

> at a number of levels: at the level of daily life through the everyday acts that constitute our identities and relational communities; at the level of collective action in groups, networks, and movements constituted around feminist visions of social transformation; and at the levels of theory, pedagogy, and textual creativity in the scholarly and writing practices of feminists engaged in the production of knowledge (Mohanty C. T., 2003, p. 5).

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, a summary of the main questions that this study seeks to address, alongside the sections and parts in which they are treated would be as follows:

1 - As a backdrop to assessing the women's question, as it stands today, what are the historical foundations and the background of feminism within the socialist and nationalist movements of India, since pre-independence? Within this context, how has religion influenced in the women's question? These questions are addressed in **Parts 1 and 2** of this study.

2 - How has the history and evolution of feminist practices in India, as represented and seen within rural and modern art, and literature, shaped the women's question, even while not being overtly recognised as feminist in character? The issues of inquiry here are studied within parts **2, 3 and 4**.

3- Keeping in mind the specific location of Indian women of different regions, castes and classes, what are the subversive trends and evolutions brought about by vernacular art production by rural women artists? Within this context, what results do the collaborative experiences between rural, urban and mainstream artists achieve, in combating entrenched religious, social and cultural barriers affecting a large part of the women's population? A study of the work of three acclaimed vernacular artists, women's organisations and promoters of women

empowering activities and traditional Indian arts, offers insights into this question in **part 4.**

4 - How are the creative journeys of mainstream, rural and urban artists contributing to advances in women's status through empowerment and progressive sociocultural expectations? **Parts 3, 4, 5 and 6** examine the diverse aspects of this question from distinct perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of this study requires that it be grounded in post-colonial, feminist and visual culture theory, and that it be approached from a critical inquiry, mixed qualitative research angle. This would involve a social constructionist epistemology paradigm; standpoint theory and partial case study research. Additionally, some analysis of existing empirical data and literature would be pertinent.

Qualitative Research and Social Constructionism

In the 1970s, what has been termed as a reformist movement in qualitative research in the social sciences began to evolve, (Schwandt, 2000). Schwandt states that the movement drew on various intellectual developments and interdisciplinary alliances, amongst them feminism, to try and verify the question of what constitutes legitimate research and the correct methods and objectives of inquiry and analysis in the social sciences and humanities. Sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann contributed significantly to the widespread concept of social construction as a research tool, with their book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). They argue and present the theory that social interaction dictates our general knowledge and understanding of life; that the repetition of ideas, actions and concepts leads to their acceptance at both

individual and institutional level, which in turn leads to them eventually becoming considered as the norm. To quote Johannes Brusila; “people's conceptions of reality are determined by a socially institutionalized system of meanings” (Brusila, 2015, p. para. 6). Brusila asserts that although it would be challenging to define the various or specific research trends that could be seen to apply constructionist ideas or tendencies, there are specific pointers to look for.

Social psychologist Vivien Burr states that any approach based on one or more of four assumptions could be considered as a social constructionist one. She states that to start with, knowledge that is considered a norm and “taken-for-granted” (as cited in Brusila, 2015, para.7); has to be assessed from a critical position so as to encourage the observer to be able to challenge the view and understanding of situations and common beliefs as being “based on objective, unbiased observation”. She also emphasises the importance of being aware of the cultural and historical context and influence on the perception of reality. “A person’s understanding of the world depends on her or his background, therefore all notions are relative in the sense that they are dependent upon the particular social and economic context of their time” (as cited in Brusila, 2015, para.7).

A third assumption that Burr highlights is that society and social interactions are what sustain our perception of knowledge. “Our versions of knowledge become fabricated through daily interactions between people in the course of social life rather than through objective perceptions” (as cited in Brusila, 2015, para.7). Finally, Burr also asserts that another principle feature in

constructionism hinges on our understanding of the world, which directly influences our decisions, the way we act and behave. "Knowledge and social action go together; our ways of understanding the world also influence our ways of operating, (as cited in Brusila, 2015, para.7). In this final, typical feature of constructionism, Burr considers that the patterns of action that are maintained or excluded in society are directly influenced or sustained by descriptions or constructions of the world. This "inevitably brings to the forefront questions of power relationships. This [sic] also includes research and therefore researchers who adopt constructionist ideas should also identify their own premises and be aware of their consequences" (as cited in Brusila, 2015, para.7).

Within this discourse, "constructionism has reverberated across the social sciences since the 1960s" (Weinberg, 2008, p. 3). As Holstein and Gubrium assert, the constructionist point of view has always emphasized the evolving and dynamic aspects of social realities and the manner in which these realities are construed and interpreted. The principal constructionist discourse asserts that society and individuals actively create the diverse elements of their everyday life, nothing is static or simply existing for participants. Although not without controversy, criticism or debate, "constructionism has become an intellectual movement whose empirical insights are widely recognised.[…] constructionism as embodied in the social sciences offers a useful empirical perspective that has proven remarkable fruitful in the past four decades" (Weinberg, 2008, pp. 3,4). Holstein and Gubrium assert that constructionism questions the nature of reality

and how in turn this reality may be contested and changed both politically and socially.

Feminist, postcolonial and cultural studies all have constructionist impetuses which are driven by "one of constructionism's leading themes, namely, that realities that are constructed can be deconstructed and assembled otherwise. This places constructionism squarely in a political environment," (Weinberg, 2008, p. 9). In other words, as Ian Hacking states, constructionism must be used to raise awareness which in turn becomes a tool with which to provoke and set the foundations for change, (Hacking, 1999). Hacking also asserts that "Undoubtedly the most influential social construction doctrines have had to do with gender" (Hacking, 1999, p. 7). Judith Butler poses the question of whether gender – which she states as being considered by many feminists as a cultural interpretation – could not be constructed in a different manner; she questions what elements go into the construction of gender and whether these are truly barred from transformation, (Butler, 1990).

As such, adhering to this argument, Hacking emphasises the importance of employing social constructionist studies in specific cases to raise general consciousness towards social situations in order to promote "a better way of thinking and, more important, living with respect to the worlds we inhabit" (Weinberg, 2008, p. 15). In chapter 20 of the *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, titled *Constructionism and the Grounded Theory*, Kathy Charmaz states that "A social constructionist approach to grounded theory allows us to address

why questions while preserving the complexity of social life" (Weinberg, 2008, p. 397).

In alliance with this philosophy and objective, in chapter 6 of the *Sage Handbook of Social Work Research*, Bob Pease states that over the last few years in various parts of the world there has been an evident revival of "critical and anti-oppressive approaches to social work theory and practice […] all share a commitment to social justice, human rights and social transformation" (2010, p. 98). Within the paradigms of qualitative research, Pease also asserts that constructionist and other anti-oppressive qualitative research methodologies are more evident in what he terms as disciplinary fields such as gender studies and postcolonial studies, amongst others. Tom Andrews states that "social constructionism can generate real debate and lead to change." (Andrews, 2012, p. para.22). According to Young and Colin, constructivism and social constructionism are often used interchangeably, each having a subtly different emphasis on individual experiences or on a societal point of view; (as cited in Andrews, 2012).

Amongst numerous scholars, there is also consensus in the understanding that within grounded theory, constructionism allows for a deeper understanding and analysis of the contexts, positions and discourses within the social research question. This thus helps not only to understand the manner in which specific groups, categories and individuals of society are differently affected by power, oppression and inequalities, but also provides the inquirer with the tools to

evaluate the relationship between social structures, cultures, practices and policies, and the suffering of specific individuals and groups, (Charmaz, 2007; Choi & Holroyd, 2007; et al. as cited in Kathy Charmaz); (Denzin & Yvonne S. Lincoln, 2011, p. 362).

Considering all of the points and positions laid out previously, using a constructionist approach as a part of this study is clearly relevant to examining the multiple aspects of the social phenomenon in question in this study. As Johannes Brusila asserts, “During the last few decades constructionism has become a key scholarly trend in social sciences and cultural studies.” (Brusila, 2015, p. para.4).

Feminist Standpoint Theory and Methodology

The publication of Nancy Hartsock´s book, *Money, Sex, and Power*, in 1983 led to a new and renovated perspective of feminist theory (Hekman, 1997). The method that Hartsock defined in feminist theory came to be known as *Standpoint theory*. Her viewpoint was highly influenced by Marxism while at the same time focusing specifically on the feminist objective. Hartsock asserted (as cited in Hekman, 1997), that it is the specific standpoint or position of women in society that justifies the truth of feminism as well as the method with which to analyse feminist reality. Several publications followed, such as Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintakka’s book, *Discovering Reality*, published in 1983, also featuring an essay by Nancy Hartsock. Other highly influential books by Harding covered feminist standpoint theory within the perspective of science and feminism. Thus,

several reputable publications led to what was a sociological methodology from the specific "standpoint of women" (Hekman, 1997, p. 341).

According to Hekman, for various reasons, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a decline in the position of standpoint theory, especially amongst younger generation feminist theorists. Marxism had suffered extensive discredit and standpoint theory did not seem to align with postmodernism or poststructuralism which were normally considered to be important influences in feminist theory. However, as Hekman asserts, feminist standpoint theory defines the necessity to justify the claims of feminist theory and politics. "Feminist standpoint theory raises a central and unavoidable question for feminist theory: How do we justify the truth of the feminist claim that women have been and are oppressed?" (Hekman, 1997, p. 342). Thus, the development of standpoint theory was essentially led by the theorists' convictions that knowledge is directly constructed or produced from situations and perspectives that are multiple and diverse as far as the points that shape these views and perspectives. "[…] knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced" (Hekman, 1997, p. 342).

In *QUEST a feminist quarterly*, cofounded in 1973 by Nancy Hartsock (1943-2015), we find an article she published in which she asserts that the feminist method permits the study of the normal daily lives of subjects while

analysing the social realities and institutions that mould those lives (Hartsock, 1975).[19] By the early 1980s, it seemed that Standpoint theory, while offering an alternative perception of truth and the possibility of a less repressive society; became the reigning method for the feminist movement. It put a label on the oppression of women which was grounded in the reality of women's lives while questioning "the masculinist definition of truth and method embodied in modern Western science and epistemology" (Hekman, 1997, p. 356). T Bowell states that there are three main points to feminist Standpoint Theory. These are:

> (1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized (Bowell, 2011, p. para.1).

Bowell asserts that feminist standpoint theory has been instrumental in epistemology; it has contributed to methodological debates in the social and natural sciences as well as the discourse of philosophy, of science and political

[19] The whole compilation of this invaluable collection is currently accessible online at: https://archive.org/details/questquarterly

See also: The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism (Hartsock N. C., 1983).

activism. Apart from being amongst the most influential and debated theories of feminist thinking, standpoint theories place the relationships between knowledge, political and social power in the spotlight. Standpoint theories describe as well as analyse the results and consequences of diverse power structures on knowledge; while prescribing a focus and trend of inquiry that is derived from the standpoints of the shared political and social struggle of marginalized individuals. This offers the possibility of a route forward, in other words progress, towards fairer and more just societies.

> Feminist standpoint theories emerged in the 1970s, […] share a commitment to acknowledging, analysing and drawing on power/knowledge relationships, and on bringing about change which results in more just societies. Feminist scholars […] have advocated taking women's lived experiences, particularly experiences of (caring) work, as the beginning of scientific inquiry. Central to all these standpoint theories are feminist analyses and critiques of relations between material experience, power, and epistemology, and of the effects of power relations on the production of knowledge (Bowell, 2011, p. para. 1).

Amongst the main proponents of feminist standpoint theory are sociologists Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins, political philosophers Nancy Hartsock and Alison Jagger, sociologist of science Hilary Rose and philosopher of science Sandra Harding (Bowell, 2011). They amplified the focus of the standpoint of the

working classes to a specific area covering the feminist standpoint. They asserted that within feminist standpoint theories the specific socio-political positions that women and other economically and socially underprivileged groups occupy serve as possible sites of epistemic privilege. These offer the opportunity to investigate questions involving not only the socially and politically marginalized, but also, those of the oppressors who occupy positions of social and political privilege, (Bowell, 2011). "Starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (Harding 1993, p. 56; as cited in Bowell, 2011).

Bowell asserts that within feminist activism, feminist standpoint theory made its appearance in academic discourses at about the same time as feminist activism brought about the feminist conscious movement. According to Bowell, this in itself helps clarify how "feminist standpoint theories are grounded in feminist political practice" (Bowell, 2011, p. para.15). Different standpoints serve as collective viewpoints. They offer the members themselves of society as well any outside observers, the ability to raise awareness and gain recognition of common standpoints held by many; and as such, the possibility of extending the scope of a study in a way that it is not necessarily limited to the narrative of one individual person. As such, objective inquiry is a valued epistemic approach in feminist standpoint theory; while simultaneously, it strives to understand and analyse the varied effects of social location on epistemic factors and knowledge.

In other words, inevitably, through feminist standpoint theories, researchers are committed to the fact that absolutely all social situations are relevant to epistemology as well as the scope and or limitations of what can be learned.

> The social situation of an epistemic agent—her gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and physical capacities—plays a role in forming what we know and limiting what we are able to know. […] The influence of social location on epistemic content and capacity can be felt throughout our epistemic practices, shaping not only the way in which we understand the world, but also the way in which it is presented to us via experience (Bowell, 2011, p. para.8).

It is clear that the particular personal situation and location of an individual or a group is the final determining factor of the reality of their experience. A mother of two young children manoeuvring a bulky stroller down a flight of stairs without a ramp, while at the same time keeping a tight grip on her slightly older child's hand, does not perceive the same reality as the able bodied teenager bounding down the same stairs, headphones in place. Feminist standpoint theories attempt to explore beyond the role played by social location on shaping and structuring knowledge. They uphold the thesis that objectivity in understanding the effect of power relations on knowledge is paramount to truly learning the knowledge and power relationship.

Feminist standpoint theory is firmly aligned with the Marxist view that marginalized and other specific social locations “are epistemically superior in that they afford hitherto unrecognized epistemic privilege, thereby correcting falsehoods and revealing previously suppressed truths” (Bowell, 2011, p. para.10). As such, according to Sandra Harding, "Standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage" (2004; 7-8); (as cited in Bowell, 2011, para. 10). The objectives of standpoint theories proponents is to provide tools with which to progress further than the mere descriptive and “situated-knowledge thesis to a more normative thesis” (Bowell, 2011, p. para.11), which it is assumed would help develop fairer, more equitable societies.

Standpoint theorists assert that the emergence of standpoints jump starts the process of learning. Awareness of standpoints start to prevail when the members of society who are normally marginalized and invisible from the advantageous perspectives of the epistemically powerful, begin to develop awareness and consciousness of their disadvantageous social situation, as regards socio-political power and oppression. Standpoint theorists also insist that far from being limited to an individualist lens which focuses only on individual social locations, as some critics have claimed; standpoints emerge as a collective process where there is the recognition of sharing similar, disadvantaged standpoints as others.

As such, the raising of awareness which can be considered as a form of self-definition, offers the first opportunity of finding a voice. It thus provides a

starting point of self-assertion and identity questioning; which in turn helps to challenge the conventional stereotypes and identities that are traditionally imposed by the hegemonic viewpoint of the socially and politically dominant. Thus, awareness and the emergence of standpoints offer the first tools through which groups and individuals can question traditional power politics and hegemony, perceived as normal and true up until that moment.

Clearly feminist standpoint theorists consider that there are major political and epistemic advantages in beginning enquiries from within the real experiences of women´s lives; not least that this provides for a clear window into their lives and the socio-political relations within which they are bound. The politicized awareness and consciousness that is created within feminist standpoint inquiry serves as an eye-opener in understanding the distortion of reality, within male-dominated ideologies. "Standpoints make visible aspects of social relations and of the natural world that are unavailable from dominant perspectives, and in so doing they generate the kinds of questions that will lead to a more complete and true account of those relations" (Bowell, 2011, p. para.14).

Within each society there are of course numerous different individuals, each with their own personal lives, activities, experiences and social relations. As such there are also potentially several different standpoints within each individual consciousness. However, the process of achieving a standpoint from a political and epistemic project offers the only possibility of developing critical insights with which to cast an alternative perspective on the social order and understand

the fact that this social order is actually constructed and maintained to protect the interests and hegemony of the oppressors. Additionally, standpoints offer unique ways in which to raise visibility of aspects of social relations and the natural world to which the dominant perspective is predominantly blind; in this way standpoints help to generate questions that could lead to a comprehensive and authentic understanding of these relations. As Darin Weinberg points out,

> Feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding (1986), Nancy Hartsock (1983), and Dorothy Smith (1987), […] argued that the social structural position of women in society yields a distinctively authoritative understanding of not only the specific forms of suffering and injustice that women must endure but also the broader structural dynamics that yield those forms of suffering and injustice. Conversely, the social structural position of men in society yields a distinctive form of blindness to these issues. Hence, women´s social structural disadvantage fosters a critical epistemological advantage when it comes to objectively understanding the causes, nature, and consequences of sexism (Weinberg, 2008, p. 26).

Weinberg also asserts that in contemporary standpoint theory, what is emphasised are women´s experiences as imperative sources of information with which to construct "empirically grounded feminist theory", (Weinberg, 2008, p. 27). Susan Hekman asserts that a shift in paradigm has occurred in feminist thought; where rather than emphasize differences, the focus is on the exploration

of differences, (Hekman S. J., 1999). The shift in focus towards exploration of differences led to a change from the focus on biology to a focus on social construction. This in turn has had major significance on feminist theory and practice. Principally it has highlighted the possible variations in masculine and feminine hierarchy; spotlighting the malleability of these hierarchies alongside the immense diversity of social forces that construct the feminine.

The feminine is constructed by race, class, sexual orientation, age and many other factors. Feminist Standpoint theory "defined the valorization [sic] of women´s difference as a mode of resistance rather than […] a mode of accommodation" (Hekman S. J., 1999). Hekman further asserts that *t*he work of Nancy Hartsock, within feminist standpoint theory centred mainly on questions of the relationship between method and epistemology in connection with feminist theory and politics. Hartsock considered that questions of method and epistemology cannot be separated from questions of power and politics. According to Hekman, Hartsock´s theory aimed at making a clear definition of the nature of the truth claims advanced by feminists by "providing a methodological grounding that validates those claims" (Hekman S. , 1997).

Case Study approach

Within the qualitative social research paradigm, this study also requires an examination of a select number of individual cases relevant to the research question. These are indispensable to help clarify current trends and state of affairs

while drawing conclusions with possible openings for further studies. As Anthony M. Orum et al. declare, “The study of the single case or an array of several cases remains indispensable to the progress of the social sciences” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 1). Arguably, the case studies approach “represents a significant methodological tool and strategy for the social scientist” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 2). Feagin et al. assert that distinguished case studies carried out in the past have “influenced several generations of social science researchers and theorists. […] research studies such as those of the Lynds, Hunter, Dahl, and Freud provide a richness and depth to description and analysis of the micro events and larger social structures that constitute life” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 6).

Referring to Feagin et al., we can thus clearly appreciate the specific arguments which demonstrate the validity of applying a case study investigative process as part of the qualitative paradigm of this study. Amongst the arguments offered by Feagin et al as points relevant to this study which can be learnt through qualitative case studies are that this allows for

> The grounding of observations and concepts about social structures in natural settings studied close at hand. […] It provides information from a number of sources and over a period of time, thus permitting a more holistic study of complex social networks and of complex social action and social meanings. […] It can furnish the dimensions of time and history to the study of social life (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 7).

In case studies, the detailed data that can be gathered allows for the development of a solid empirical base that would be indispensable for specific statements and understanding of the real human condition; events, behaviour and occurrences in their social and personal context and within the subjects´ natural surroundings. The case study approach also permits a holistic approach to the issues being studied. “Since the case study seeks to capture people as they experience their natural, everyday circumstances, it can offer a researcher empirical and theoretical gains in understanding larger social complexes of actors, actions and motives” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 8).

As such, the case study approach here has permitted me to examine the partial socio biography and or life histories of the women I have been interested in, so as to be able to understand and construct their realities as artists based on events that can also be classified as social histories of the communities involved. “A case study, […], can permit the researcher to examine not only the complex of life in which people are implicated but also the impact on beliefs and decisions of the complex web of social interaction” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 9).

Additionally, it can be safely argued that the case study lends itself to more elaborate precision in data recording of life in societies, while quantitative analysis can often be perceived as rather lifeless, unable to communicate the humane aspect or heart and soul of the research subject or subjects. Thus, as Feagin et al. assert, “the case study can enable a researcher to examine the ebb and

flow of social life over time and to display the patterns of everyday life as they change. The case study thus permits the analyst to uncover the historical dimension of a societal phenomenon or setting (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 12).

In other words, the case study as a model of qualitative research is able to eliminate differences and distances, permitting the researcher to perceive the daily reality and sentiments of the people and community being studied. It allows the researcher to discover the subtle nuances, complexities and pluralities of the social world, rather than falling into the error of over simplification which other methods might encourage. In this manner, the case study model is amongst the most appropriate approaches to grasping the nuances of human nature and social interaction in day to day circumstances. “The quintessential characteristic of case studies is that they strive towards a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1990; as cited in Tellis, 1997, p.8).

Zaidah Zainal asserts that despite the fact that the case study approach as a means of data collection continues to cause controversy, its value in the analysis, exploration and understanding of complex issues is widely acknowledged and recognised within many social science studies that require in-depth answers to specific social behaviour and phenomena, (Zainal, 2007). The case study as a research method became an interesting option as researchers became aware that it is able to offer the kind of holistic and profound view of social situations that quantitative methods used in natural sciences fall short of.

> Through case study methods, a researcher is able to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor's perspective. By including both quantitative and qualitative data, case study helps explain both the process and outcome of a phenomenon through complete observation, reconstruction and analysis of the cases under investigation (Tellis, 1997; as cited in Zainal, 2007, p. 2).

Feagin et al. assert that case studies offer the possibility of analysis from diverse points of view. Within the case study model, the researcher takes into account not only the voices and perspectives of the actors but also related groups, as well as the relationships and interaction amongst all parts. Thus, case studies offer the possibility of giving a voice and platform to sectors which are normally powerless and or voiceless. In other words, contrary to other sociological studies which often provide studies from a so called elite perspective, the case study model uses the actual voices of the subjects to present their study, (as cited in Tellis, 1997). Stake and Yin (as cited in Tellis, 1997), highlighted various options as valid sources of data and research within the case study model; amongst which documents and archival records are also included.

The case study is also stated as being appropriate for combining with other methods of research. Documents and archival records cover sources such as newspaper articles, memoranda, administrative documents, recorded archives, amongst others, (Tellis, 1997). The research methodologies outlined previously

are applied within this study, as mixed-methods within a range of suitable approaches to qualitative research inquiry, – also considering *intersectionality*,[20] – as methods which can, and often do overlap, as has been argued and discussed by scholars in different studies (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012); (Campbell, 2009).

Quality internet research

Over the last several years, the unprecedented developments and advances in information and communication technologies, the expansive growth of the internet as well as the spectacular increase in reliable on-line data reserves, and sources such as webpages, online libraries, audio, image and video banks, etc. have effectively provided me with innovative means of accessing, studying and collecting valid, up to date qualitative records and documentation apt for this study; while successfully eliminating geographical barriers and restrictions.

Despite lack of funding and the limitations of my position as an independent researcher while working full time as an EFL teacher and visual artist in Madrid, Spain, I can safely assert that I have successfully had access to a wide and rich array of reliable and authentic primary resources such as digitalized data and recordings, journals, videos, interviews, and conferences etc. all of which are

[20] See: *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, (Leslie McCall, 2005). *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 3; The University of Chicago Press.

essential for a study of this category, as well as secondary sources on which I have been able to ground and build my inquiry and theories.

I have benefited from being able to use new technologies to successfully retrieve, analyse and apply to my own research work that has already been carried out within the field. In other words, I have been able to access massive amounts of relevant and invaluable primary and secondary sources as well as online empirical data. Hence, I can comfortably state that this study is also proof of the impact of new technologies on multi-disciplinary research, that is to say, the trend and movement towards cross-disciplinary studies and scholarly collaboration.

In applying and using new technologies as a major part of my research process, I have discovered that rather than causing any disadvantage or impediment, there are in fact innumerable advantages to exploiting and developing these new means of investigation and study for qualitative research and analysis. In this era where *Fake News* is the new buzz phrase, the usage of the *World Wide Web* and new media technologies to carry out qualitative research is still a relatively new phenomenon and under much debate regarding the authenticity and validity of what is available. As such, the question of quality as well as reliability of the information and data that is retrieved depends wholly on the capacity of the researcher in employing the appropriate strategies and criteria to efficiently and effectively evaluate, distinguish and filter out the quality sources which provide the kind of material apt for inclusion in a serious study, from those which ought to be considered irrelevant or dismissed. Without a doubt however, to quote

Christine Hine, “archives of internet discussions, blogs and websites offer a rich array of data for the qualitative researcher” (Hine, 2013, p. 37). Hine further states that,

> The ease of locating data on the internet relating to practically any topic of interest can open up research projects that could otherwise be near impossible, or where substantial work from an experienced researcher would be needed to negotiate and sustain access. The Internet has an immense potential to stimulate social research by overcoming these barriers and making previously hidden or ephemeral aspects of social life accessible to the researcher´s gaze and persistent over time (p. 38).

In discussing quality internet research, Hine also emphasises the obvious necessity for such research to be cumulative and built on previous studies which were consolidated and carried out before the advent of the internet. She points out the possibilities of opening up new areas of discourse and thought within existing theories and concepts, as well as the capacity that the internet has to offer new visions and dimensions to pre-existing concepts, (Hine, 2013). Essentially, internet research must be carried out in dialogue with previously established discourse and theory.

As mentioned previously, carrying out qualitative research via the internet also raises the question of the researcher´s capacity to adequately identify and establish the authenticity and quality of source; which at the same time provide a

non-biased viewpoint or approach. Obviously, material which is found and accessed on official and educational websites, rather than personal websites, would, in most cases, much more easily meet the standards required so as to be categorised as being genuine and of scholarly value. However, without going into too many details, it suffices to say that for a reasonably veteran researcher, accustomed to checking and verifying the validity of his or her sources, most websites provide very clear pointers, clues and hints to their credentials, origin, ownership, purpose, type of organization, type of document, links to other sites or documents, etc., thus giving an experienced internet scholar most of the necessary tools with which to be able to evaluate and negotiate the quality of the information being retrieved.

PART I HISTORICAL CONTEXT: A LOOK AT THE ROOTS THAT HAVE DEFINED AND SHAPED GENDER IDENTITIES AND CONVENTIONAL CULTURE

> I spoke with enthusiasm about the possibility of researching Hindu goddess worship for my PhD dissertation and even intimated that it might be worthwhile to explore the relationship between goddesses and women. The august professor squinted slightly, then stroked his chin, seemed to ponder for a moment, then distractedly remarked,
>
> 'Ah, yes. We like them as goddesses, but not as people.'
>
> (Hiltebeitel & Erndl, 2000, p. 12)

1.1- WOMEN, RELIGION AND SOCIETY, THE LINK FROM ANCIENT TO PRESENT INDIA

Starting this study by casting our gaze back at women and religion in ancient India is relevant and indispensable, so as to be able to effectively contextualize and appreciate the all-consuming impact and role that religion has played and in many cases continues to play; in determining power politics and gender in today´s society. This in turn, allows us to fully appreciate the historical

trend as well as developments and changes that have taken place in what can be seen as contemporary history; while also bearing in mind that religion in India continues to wield an all-consuming force, dominating most aspects of politics and society, even in the twenty first century.

I would like to clarify that I base the ground work of the religious factor of this study by looking at the case of ideology and doctrines of Hinduism. This, of course, is not due to a specific partiality for Hinduism, but simply because it is the religion that predominates in India. This is also a truly unfortunate fact that has become one of the root causes of the numerous prejudices suffered by the alternative minorities who are increasingly marginalised and targeted. According to the United Nations world population review 2014, in the last Indian census which was carried out in 2011, India had a population of 1,210,193,422, and according to the 2001 census, – the latest figures had not yet been released at the time of this study – 80.5 % of Indians are Hindus, 13.4 % are Muslim, 2.3 % are Christians, 1.9 % are Sikhs, 0.8 % are Buddhists and 0.4 % are Jains, (India Census, 2014).

It would be safe to assert that many of the values and ideas that shaped power status, politics, gender roles as well as women´s day to day in the past, to a great extent, continue to exert an influence today. Partha Chatterjee states that one of the principle arguments substantiating colonial rule that the British put forward in their case of India was the fact of what they described as the

> Atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, […] by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices which […] by rationalizing such atrocities within a complete framework of religious doctrine, made them appear to perpetrators and sufferers alike as the necessary marks of right conduct (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 622).

Partha Chatterjee affirms that in response to the colonial discourse which denounced the scriptural tradition as the principal cause of misconduct towards women in India, an apparently reformed tradition of modernity was manufactured by the new patriarchy, where an image of the Indian women who was superior to western women as well as the traditional Indian women and lower class women was created, in order to represent a renewed, acutely modern national culture, (Chatterjee, 1989). However, the issue of women in the social reform agenda was in fact not actually about the condition of women, but about the political clash between the British colonialists and the nationalists. The suppression of women being directly linked to religious traditions rather than social or economic factors by the colonial powers was perceived as the condemning of Indian traditions in general.

As such, the shaping of a new superior Indian woman who embodied the supposedly superior Indian traditions and culture which were also considered as being part of the home, the inner spiritual world as opposed to the outside material world, perceived as the western world, was set into place. Women became the

guardians of this supposedly superior spiritual domain which was also directly linked with the home and nation. In other words, it was considered important to

> Cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture. This completed the formulation of the nationalist project, and as an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of Western modernity it continues to hold sway to this day (Chatterjee, 1989, pp. 623-624).

The selective process of what was deemed appropriate to adopt from the west compared to what was considered as indispensable in order to maintain national culture and identity is what shaped much of nationalist politics thereafter and it would be safe to assert that the formation of the polity of national independence went synonymously with the shaping of all the material and spiritual elements of the lives of the people involved. As such, the social reform debates of the 19th century revolved around responses to questions of what was deemed appropriate or not to adopt from the west.

As mentioned previously, the resulting ideology that was formed and disseminated was conceived on a polarizing, binary distinction of what was determined as the inferior, outer that is material and western area versus the superior, inner or spiritual and truly Indian area. The inner spiritual was purported as the true identity, and essential self, embodying the distinctive culture

of what is India and the idea that it was necessary to guard this spiritual identity at all costs while also making the necessary adjustments to the modern and material. This was to become the principle approach of the new patriarchal, nationalist system. Within the sphere of daily life and social contexts, the above ideology was translated into the home or *ghar* and the outside or *bahir*. To quote Partha Chatterjee on how this distinction shaped gender roles:

> The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world–and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir (Chattergee, 1989, pp. 238-239).

Chattergee goes on to highlight that the perception of what was considered to be colonial disdain towards Indian culture and tradition alongside the recognition of the superior material prowess of the colonizers, with the resulting ideological nationalist reaction, paved the way for the longstanding, enduring interpretation of the material as the outside world and spiritual as home; alongside the corresponding classification of gender identity and roles. "Once we match this new meaning of the home/world dichotomy with the identification of social roles

by gender, we get the ideological framework within which nationalism answered the woman question" (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 239).

In order to shed light on the truly complex and contradictory instruments at play, which in turn led to the highly disparate positions of women to be found in ancient Indian society, attitudes which as we have been seen remain rife in current Indian society; I shall focus our attention on a lecture delivered in a workshop at *The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, University of Oxford, UK*; on 19th May, 2006, by eminent scholar, Professor Mandakranta Bose, of the *Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia in Canada*. She is also Director of the Institute´s *Centre for India and South Asia Research* as well as a Fellow of the *Royal Asiatic Society* in London and *Royal Society of Canada´s Academy of Arts, Humanities and Sciences*, (Bose M. , 2006).

The introduction to Professor Bose's lecture reads,

> In India the treatises of law founded upon the sacred books of the Hindus had a far-reaching and defining influence on social life. As foundational documents of the Hindu way of life which codified social relations as well as personal belief as religious imperatives, these texts have exerted the deepest influence on the lives and conduct of women through history and their teachings have not yet entirely lost their force. In this lecture I shall consider some of the provisions in Hindu sacred law that moulded the lives of women, as derived from the writings of Manu and other ancient Hindu lawgivers, as well as some later writers, on this basis we shall attempt to

> understand the intimate connection between the religious framework and the social, which has laid the basis of women's status, roles, rights and duties in Hindu society (The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, 2006, p. para.3).

In her lecture, Professor Bose refers to the ancient Sanskrit scriptures – which most scholars agree pertain to the *Vedas* or *Vedic* texts – that determined the sociological order and norms of the time. She questions why, in spite of major reforms, particularly over the last two centuries, attitudes towards women remain glaringly abusive, prejudiced and non-egalitarian. In an attempt to help her audience understand and provide a possible explanation Professor Bose reads out sample texts from scriptures outlining attitudes that were prevalent towards women and girl children regarding their homely duties, education, and inheritance. She provides a guide from which one can attempt to decipher the basis on which the concept of womanhood was moulded and interpreted in ancient Indian society; and how the lives of women have in turn been constructed, shaped and determined by these boundaries. This framework, in numerous instances, continues today to serve as the fundamental backbone on which social structures and power politics which rule women´s lives are built.

Below I outline the theories and conclusions presented by Professor Mandakranta Bose, in the lecture at Oxford University. Women´s lives and roles were dictated by the laws of *Dharmasastra*. These defined “exactly women´s

place in the world," (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 2:31-2:33). Dharmasastra refers to the Vedic texts in Sanskrit, which laid out detailed and strict rules of family and conduct, referring to this as Hindu Dharma or religious and legal duty. The term, also spelt *Dharma-shastra,* means "righteousness science" in Sanskrit, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). In his translations of the Dharmasutras, Patrick Olivelle asserts that,

> Dharmasutras represent the culmination of a long tradition of scholarship; they reveal deep learning and document intense disputes and divergent views on a variety of topics as broad as the category of dharma itself. Dharma includes all aspects of proper individual and social behaviour as demanded by one´s role in society and in keeping with one´s social identity according to age, gender, caste, marital status and order of life (Olivelle, 1999, p. xxi).

These rules referred exclusively to where women stood, their supposed *nature* and what was expected from them within the family. Even a cursory examination of the discourse generated since the time of the scriptures, as well as the staggering magnitude and unrelenting contradictions of the stipulated norms to be found within this discourse make the immensely negative consequences of these norms immediately clear. The fact of the increasingly oppressive attention and focus that was afforded women, as regarded their way of life, as well as all aspects of their expected conduct and character, much to their disadvantage and

detriment, points to the continuously unresolved status of women, according to the literature at hand. This questionably might in part account for the contradictions as well as the discrepancies to be found within the discourse, where opposing points of views and opinions are often to be encountered.

Consequently, although it might be difficult to effectively weigh up in what measure scholarly views actually influenced on women´s lives in real social contexts, the body of work available does attest to the genuine interest and vigour of intellectual uptake in considering alternative viewpoints; despite the often authoritarian characteristics of the same. One of the recurring elements to be found in the historical discourse of women is that "in some texts they appear not just as social beings but almost as a separate species, with roles and treatments assigned to them on the basis of an essentialist view of women´s nature" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 3:48-4:02).

The texts accord women characteristics that are deemed "essential to women, without reference to the temporal or social contexts they occupy" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 4:05-4:12). As a result, the discourse takes shape veering from *prescription* to *description* and then *assertion*. Many of the texts, written by highly influential scholars, most notably the Manusmriti, (*Manava Dharma Shastra*) or the *Laws of Manu*, from 1500BC, (Buhler, n.d); (Buhler); [21] go so far

[21] See Appendix for a list of Manu's laws.

as to ordain what women should actually be doing in the home, how they should be treated and even how they should be regarded; describing what is supposed to be the emotional personality common to all women as well as their supposedly unrestrained sexual appetite, "bestial in its lack of self-restraint" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 4:57-5:02), and apparently characterised by complete lack of control on which a tight rein needs to be maintained at all times.

According to Hirday N. Patwari, the Manusmriti is actually the first available work of the *Brahminical Dharma,* which in Hindu mythology is considered to be the word of *Brahma,* the god of creation, and the most authoritative statement on Dharma. As understood in Hinduism, Dharma is the cosmic law sustained by the gods and Dharma stipulates what is the correct behaviour to be followed by humans as well as demanding fidelity to a specific social order. (Patwari, 2011). Without any records to actually confirm details of the life of Manu, it would seem that he most likely came from the conservative Brahman class, hailing from Northern India. Manusmriti comprises a colossal 2690 verses which are divided into 12 chapters. Strict followers of Hinduism "consider the Manusmriti as the divine code of conduct and, accordingly, the status of women as depicted in the text has been interpreted as Hindu divine law" (Patwari, 2011, p. para. 2).

Even the briefest glance at fragments of Manu´s laws, which are still firmly entrenched in many aspects of conservative, traditional Hindu society and mind-set, will enable us to appreciate the colossal magnitude of what the Indian

women´s struggle and movements for equal status and empowerment have been up against, through the ages. A sample of Manu's laws have been included in the appendix at the end of this study from the a list drawn up by Hirday N. Patwari, on the *Nirmukta* website, with some, but certainly not a complete list, of the laws that are significant to the purpose of this study. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith's 1991 translation, *The Laws of Manu* are also relevant to the point being made here.

As can be demonstrated, the Manusmriti clearly promoted what can be categorized as not only a hugely damaging and humiliating sexist philosophy, but also an outrageously racist one. Barbara N. Ramusack also offers a sample of the laws which as she asserts, "severely reduced the property rights of women, recommended a significant difference in ages between husband and wife and the relatively early marriage of women, and banned widow remarriage" (Ramusack & Sievers, 1999, p. 28). As might also be easily inferred, *Brahman or Brahmin* makes reference to the so called 'upper caste' Hindus, while *Shudra* to the so called 'lower classes'. W.A. Borody states in an article in the *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, that the Manusmriti

> does indeed defend the idea that certain human beings should be treated as less than human, as 'subhumans,' as mere defiling things, in spite of the use that can be made of them, [...] claims about the inferiority of the lower castes and outcastes, i.e., the untouchables — the Dalits and Shudras — who by recent estimates make up more than half the population of modern India (Borody, 2011, p. 190).

Professor Mandakranta Bose´s lecture in 2006, elaborates on Manu's doctrines, such as commenting on his specific instructions to pray for the birth of sons combined with warnings regarding the undesirability of daughters who are sources of calamities and misfortune to the father. Manu's laws set out strict rulings regarding what was acceptable behaviour by wives and women, the stipulated and permitted manner of relating with male members of the family as daughters, wives and mothers; who as Bose points out were according to the Dharmasutras viewed as "attachments to men and never as independent persons on their own" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 5:20-5:30).

Evidence suggests that there were periods in which women were allowed a certain amount of mobility, but this was still only within the space of the home and they were not permitted to carry out any action outside the family. As such, even though one can find literature focusing on reverence and admiration for the role of motherhood; inevitably, the emphasis of social discourse and regulation deviated into the relationship and roles of husbands and wives, with a persistently increasing expectation and demand from wives of absolute obedience and servitude towards husbands, *pativrata* (Bose, 2006), (Flood, 1996, pp. 65-66), (Shah S. , 2012, pp. 79-85).[22]

[22] For more detail see: (Shah S. , 2012) On Gender Wives and "Pativratas". http://www.jstor.org/stable/41633811

Scholars of Hinduism make references to the *Rigveda*, in Sanskrit meaning *The Knowledge of Verses*. This was the original oral version that later made up the sacred books of Hinduism which were transcribed around about 300BC. (Encyclopaedia Britannca, 2013). In the Rigveda, verses of prayers can be found alluding to the partiality of sons over daughters, sons who were considered to be auspicious, "a light in the highest heaven," while the birth of daughters was deemed a misfortune, "a form of misery," (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 6:42-6:48)*;* without sons, entry into heaven was doomed as unattainable. Professor Bose goes on to explain the performance of numerous rituals and ceremonies, what she terms as *occult prophylactics,* (Bose M. , 2006, p. min. 7:00) which were carried out as desperate measures to avoid the birth of a girl child.

In her lecture Bose outlines the increasingly extreme and *savage* measures which are prescribed in some of the texts; for example the *Atharva veda,* which mandates that not only are girl babies and children undesirable and inauspicious, but that they should undergo *parasyanti*, literally meaning *alienation*, "that is abandoned in order to bring about death," (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 7:30-7:37). The viciousness and barbarity of such a mandate proved to be unacceptable for a lot of the population who found it extremely difficult to endure. This then led on to an adaptation of "*parasyanti,*" by the Vedic scholar Sayanacharya, who appeased and diminished the harshness of the original law by reinterpreting it as the process in which daughters are transferred to other families in the act of

marriage, which was seen as an "obviously beneficial act" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 8:00-8:02).

It would seem that although voices such as Sayanacharya's, opposing the abuse and mistreatment of girl babies and daughters were few and far between, the adaptation of *parasyanti,* by Sayanacharya, sometime in the fourteenth century, did bring about some positive change in the attitude towards daughters or girl children. It was considered that as daughters are inevitably temporary guests in the homes of their parents, destined to be given away to their husbands and in laws, thus bringing upon their parents the sorrow and pain of parting; during the time in which they were in their parents abode and care, they were to be treated with the utmost love and tenderness.

Further singular instances of when daughters were received as boons to their families and societies are cited, for example in the post-Vedic text, the *Puranas* pertaining supposedly from the 4th to the 11th century CE, (Bhardwaj, 1973),[23] where women and daughters are ascribed the position and prestige fit for she who brings about life; without whom the whole of creation would cease.

Following this philosophy, the *Shastras* or religious scriptures outlining rules in the *Matsya Purana*, – pertaining to the later of the eighteen post Vedic scriptures that is the Puranas; (Kemmer, 2011), (Goldberg, 2002), – actually went

[23] Bhardwaj points out that the dates of the composition of the Puranas are not completely verified. (Bhardwaj, 1973, p. 17)

so far as to state that "a girl is equal to ten sons and that the birth of a daughter brings high merit" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 9:03-9:11). At a later stage, in the 19th century, this philosophy can be seen to have been championed and vigorously upheld by the famous Bengali poet, philosopher and academic, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, whose body of work towards improving the status of women is to be reckoned with and one which we shall look into specifically, further on in this study.

Unfortunately, the two most diffused and influential religious scriptures in modern India, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, irrefutably patriarchal, perpetuate the highly prejudicial stance of lamenting and mourning the birth of daughters, while rejoicing and celebrating the birth of sons; with dictums such as "those who desire honour do not wish to be fathers of a daughter", to have a daughter born to them is a misery for the parents, the birth of a daughter spells anxiety for a father" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 9:55-10:18) and similar. Although the Mahabharata contains many stories of strong and powerful women, it still opposes the independence of women and places them in a subordinate position to men. I might add here that from 1987 onwards, both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been aired as major television series on prime-time TV, – on the national Indian, state television channel, *Doordashan*, – achieving record breaking viewing figures. According to Shanti Kumar,

> The Mahabharata outscored even the astronomical viewership figures attained by the Ramayana serial that it had replaced in the "prime time

> religion" hour on Sunday mornings. Mahabharata was reportedly seen with ritual regularity by more than 90 percent of Indian television homes, transcending boundaries of religion, cast, class, language, region, and political allegiance. As in the case of the Ramayana, weekly household routines were reportedly organised around the Sunday telecast and family TV sets often became sites of community viewing (Kumar S. , 2005, p. 319).

Looking at the above data, it is fairly easy to comprehend just how simple it can be today to set in motion dangerously effective and efficient propaganda, leading to societies where a large part of the population uphold a culture of bigotry, radically racist as well as sexist ideologies; beliefs which continue to flourish and proliferate in contemporary India.

Professor Bose draws our attention to the fact that the question of how this philosophy managed to become quite so entrenched in Hindu religious ideology and doctrine is an enigma, when placing it in stark contradiction to the established point of view of high Hindu intellectuals and scholars, who were of the opinion that "girls should receive an education; as well as the historical reality of women, celebrated for their intellectual and spiritual achievement," (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 10:33-10:41). She cites the advice given in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisha* – the final segments of the Vedas, which place high emphasis on knowledge with the initiation of philosophy, mysticism and esoteric thought; – (Basham, Dimock, &

Doniger, 2014). In these examples, parents are encouraged to perform *Yajñya or Poojah* – a ritual of worship, prayers and offerings in the presence of and conducted by a Brahman priest – in order to "try and ensure the birth of a daughter, who would be *Pundita*", (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 10:52-10:54), that is, a learned woman. However, illustrating the contradictions that were strife in gender discourse, even the title of *Pundita* was open to reinterpretation. Some scholars such as Adi Shankara, Hindu philosopher and theologian from 700 AD, (Mayeda, 2017), described it as referring to a woman who is well versed in house hold chores and duties.

On the other hand, many early writers and intellectuals did in fact vigorously promote education for girls and their admittance into *the sacred thread* ritual or *Upanayana,* – referring to the ceremony of acceptance as a full member into the religious community, and the initiation into the life of a student, – also known as *Brahmacarin* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). This ceremony bestowed upon girls the legitimate position of being able to pursue knowledge, as well as the right and responsibility to perform and lead *Yajñya or Poojah*.

I would like to highlight that currently, with few exceptions, the role of *Hindu priest* is still mainly allocated to men. However, the evidence available regarding the inclusion of women in intellectual and spiritual pursuits, – to be found in the early scriptures and texts available, – suggests that there was an era when education and the presence of women in positions of authority were commonplace and indeed quite the norm. It was recommended that girls go

through Upanayana, by the age of eight, thus starting their education, and stipulated that "*women can be either Sadyovadhus or Brahamavadinis"* (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 11:44-11:48). According to Krishna Reddy, *Brahamavadinis* were women who dedicated their lives to the search for knowledge, spiritual growth and scholarly accomplishment, while *Sadyovadhus* made reference to those who committed themselves to the care and well-being of their families (Reddy, 2011).

Reddy also states that there was no conflict or difference in hierarchy between the two types of status for women, and as such their roles could overlap; in that Brahamavadinis were not obliged to become ascetics, renouncing family life and all worldly goods, thus many Brahamavadinis were in fact married women. Along the same lines, in many instances Sadyovadhus combined their family responsibilities with the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual realization. (Reddy, 2011)[24]. However, during that same period, conflictingly, there were also instances when it was deemed that women could be educated only under the schooling of their male relatives, that is to say their fathers, brothers, or uncles; once more demonstrating the existence of a psychology of possessiveness, as towards an object, the necessity to control and reluctance to permit true independence and liberty of movement and decision.

[24] See also: (Kumbhare, 2009) Women of India: Their Status Since the Vedic Times

Perhaps part of the explanation for these conflicting doctrines by different scholars, all to be found within the same religious Vedic scriptures, might be due to the fact that, as Patrick Olivelle outlines in his translation, the scholars who wrote these texts belonged to different schools of thought or Vedic branches which initially originated from four lines, *the Rigveda,, Yajur, Sama and Atharva*. Presumably, due to geographical extension, differences and disputes in thought, rituals and other variations, these branches split up even further resulting in the Vedic texts which were finally composed within numerously diverse schools of thought and orally passed on, (Olivelle, 1999).

The provisions for women´s education that were set in place during the early periods, gave rise to numerous women whose intellectual achievements were acknowledged and highly celebrated, including the composers of many of the hymns and verses to be found in the Vedas. Professor Bose names the *Brihaddevata* as an example, in which we can find names such as *Vishwavara, Apavala, Ghosha, Surya, Savitri, Indrani, Shraddha, Kamanayi, Sachni, Paumani, Urvashi,* amongst many others, (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 12:38-12:50). It is clear that there were no shortage of scholars and thinkers who revered and embraced the presence of women intellectual peers, and in fact, went to great lengths to defend, encourage and maintain the right to education and choice for women. Knowledge and the arts are embodied in the figure of the well-known Hindu goddess *Sarasvati,* who is usually depicted holding a *Sitar,* the well-known, ancient Indian stringed instrument.

However, it is also evident from the texts spanning the different ages, that despite the fact of the glorification of women by religion and the presence of periods of enlightenment and awareness; for clearly patriarchal reasons, women have for the most part been held in contempt, relegated to the position of lesser beings, treated with disdain and as morally unsound. The strikingly grim contradictions in Hindu gender discourse are amply exemplified in the infinite cases of contradictory doctrines that Professor Bose cites in her lecture.

We learn that despite multiple examples and substantiation of women´s intellectual prowess; to be found within the *Vedas* themselves, the *Rigveda* still dismissed the evidence with statements such as "the mind of women brutes no discipline," or "her intellect has little weight" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 15:03-15:16). Furthermore, the *Rigveda* also denied daughters the right to patrimony and in citations to be found in the *Taittiriya Samhita,* women were allowed no legal rights whatsoever.

In contrast, *The Nirukta* authorizes fathers to accredit their daughters with the right to inherit, as does *Gautama*, especially in the case that there is no male heir; as well as recommending that wives and mothers leave their property to their daughters, especially in cases where she is not married. Similarly, *Brihaspati* is said to have endorsed the notion that as daughters are born from the same source as sons, that is their mother´s womb, they should be entitled to inherit the family patrimony, in the absence of sons, (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 15:20-17:03). Note that there seems to be no mention of sharing of patrimony between daughters and

sons. The daughter´s right to inherit, it would seem, depended on there being no son who could inherit; while it is understood that the Rigveda mandate is that in the absence of sons, the family patrimony is not to be inherited by a daughter, but by another male relative.

The *Rigveda* however, does not limit its mandate to dismissing women as thinking beings, denying them the most basic civil rights; it goes so far as to caution men against what is considered as the debasement and immorality of women, likening them to hyenas or jackals, implying untrustworthiness, cruelty, decadence and deprivation; branding women as being vile in their greed, bestiality and perversion, with statements such as “with women there can be no friendship,[...] the hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women” (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 17:19-17:58).

Regrettably, as previously mentioned, it would appear that the discourse that has had the most lasting influence, the one that laid out the foundation laws, laws that continue to govern and exercise immense control and pull on sociocultural norms and expectations in contemporary India, pertain to the Manusmriti; which as we have seen, constitute some of the most oppressive and demeaning mandates to have been established and upheld, as regards the status of women,.

According to Romila Thapar, "The severity of the Dharma-shastras was doubtless a commentary arising from the insecurity of the orthodox in an age of flux," (Thapar R. , Early India, 2004, p. 279). In referring to the period of

upheaval and change brought about by the disintegration of the Maura and Shunga empires between 184 BC and 75 BC, Partick Olivelle also draws our attention to the fact that the weight that the *Laws of Manu* carry should not be taken lightly; through indirect influences and exchanges the teachings did have an effect on large parts of the Indian population and still continue to be a source of common reference in scholarly debates, (Olivelle, 2005).[25]

Professor Bose declares that "we must not ignore the most widely known authority on Hindu conduct, the legendary Manu, to whose pronouncements on women much of the restrictions and degradation of women´s life in modern times have been traced" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 18:10-18:26). She outlines statements to be found in the Manusmriti such as,

> It is the very nature of women to corrupt men on earth; […] men must make their women dependent day and night and keep under their own control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth and her sons guard her in old age, a woman is not fit for independence. No man is able to guard women entirely by force but they can be entirely guarded by using these means: he should keep her busy amassing and spending money, engaging in

[25] See also: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1880s_andbefore.html

> purification, attending to her duty, cooking food and looking after the furniture (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 20:07-20:21).

In keeping with the shockingly contradictory nature of the discourse and doctrines on codes of behaviour and women´s character, that have contributed towards shaping the societies on which we are focusing, the *Manusmriti* does also have eulogies for women, making also a point of stating the importance of respecting and honouring them. For example:

> Fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers in law who wish for great fortune should revere these women and adorn them; the deities delight in places where women are revered, but where women are not revered all rites are fruitless. Where the women of the family are miserable, the family is soon destroyed, but it always thrives where the women are not miserable. Homes that are cast by the women in the family that have not been treated with due reverence are completely destroyed, as if struck down by witchcraft, therefore, men who wish to prosper should always revere these women with ornaments, clothes and food at celebrations and festivals. There is unwavering good fortune in the family where the husband is always satisfied by the wife and the wife by the husband (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 18:43-19:58).

Manusmriti is rife with such incomprehensible contradictions from one chapter to the next; although some academics attribute it´s authorship to just one scholar, amongst them Patrick Olivelle, (Olivelle, 2005, p. 19); it is quite likely that the contradictions to be encountered have their origins in a diversity of authorship, attesting to the possibility and probability that it may have been written over an extended period of time by various scholars..

The striking peculiarity about the discourse however, is that although there are chapters dedicated to attributing women with the intellect and humanness natural to any person, as well as the deserved position of respect and dignity that anyone living in a civilized society would merit; the overall message was quite the opposite. Women were generally ascribed with traits of personality that are not only weak and feeble but also avaricious, dishonest, highly immoral, aberrant and perverse; as such, the centre of Hindu gender discourse became increasingly focused on sanctions and systems with which to maintain under control and resist this so called innate decadence of women, which was perceived as threatening and a necessary obligation. The interpretation was that “women needed to be both protected and guarded because they are weak in body and mind and unfit for independence” (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 22:41-22.50).

This philosophy resulted in the development of a discipline specifically focused on women, with sociological mechanisms and norms that deliberately subjugated them increasingly to the dominance of men, placing them in situations of absolute dependence and restricting them to purely domestic roles. Within the

domestic roles of women, *Motherhood* has always been consistently and highly celebrated and revered; the epitome of a woman´s achievements being her sons, whose birth bestowed upon her a status and honour which normally protected her from the kind of ostracism or retribution to which she otherwise might have been at risk of being subjected.

The worship and roles of goddesses and deities in Hinduism also reflect this elevation and reverence, which we shall examine more closely in following chapters. However, it would seem that the spotlight of Hindu discourse as regards women, which has successfully filtered its way to modern times, was always decidedly more weighted on their roles as wives as opposed to mothers. In their roles as wives, unquestionable and total obedience and servitude to the husband and the birth of sons was regarded as imperious to all other commitments.

The doctrines dictating women´s roles and existences as wives seemed to reach unparalleled heights in the eighteenth century, where the daily routine of wives was stipulated in the form of a set of rules and codes of behaviour to be followed to the letter.[26] Women were prescribed as innately impure due to their

[26] For detailed accounts of the Sanskrit terminology and precise wording, nature and length of these codes, see also: (Leslie, Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women, 1992) Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women; (Leslie, 1989) The Perfect Wife; (Hallstrom, 1999) Mother of Bliss: Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982).

natural monthly menstrual cycle, – opposing the Tantric view of the purifying quality of the menstrual cycle – and as such are incapable of reaching liberation, precisely due to their natural state of impurity. The code of conduct prescribed above all absolute deference and dutifulness to the husband, inclusive of self-sacrifice to the point of death if required; irrespective of whether these duties impinged on other commitments such as the caring of a child or elderly relative or other possible social interactions or engagements, (Flood, 1996).

These dictums effectively succeeded in wholly isolating women from the public domain as well as annihilating them as individuals or thinking and acting beings. Professor Bose, quotes from the study and translation from Sanskrit by Julia Leslie, "The primary duty of a wife is obedient service to her husband, which she must carry out without regard even to the saving of her own life" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 37:30-37:55). Based on this doctrine, "the virtuous wife must abdicate her individuality and her principles so entirely that she must accept her husband´s action even of selling her" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 38:12-38:23). It would thus be safe to assume that what these dictums succeeded in achieving was the wholly effective depersonalization of women, where their individuality, tastes and needs faded into complete disregard and inconsequence. Women as wives within the family unit were reduced to the position of serviceable servants, readily available workhorses, at the permanent beck and call of the man of the house, *her lord;* and secondly, wifehood converted them into objects and property to be used at will, forever at the disposal of their owner and lord, their husband.

They were expected to feel greatly honoured and take the utmost pleasure in fulfilling their wifely duties to perfection. Any signs of boredom, lack of interest, frustration or other expressions of non-conformity would be taken as signs of highly inappropriate behaviour, indecent, lacking in morals and punishable physically and through public humiliation and loss of respect in the society.

Thus, woe betided the woman who aspired to anything other than absolute, unresisting, deferential service and devotion to her husband. Professor Bose also highlights that as objects of property, women were not limited to being articles of social capital and possessions, who secured for their husbands the prestige and prominence which was attained from their exemplary service and devotion to him as well as unsullied reputation, – this also pointed towards the husband´s highly aspired for masculinity, demonstrated through his skill and capacity to maintain his position of authority and control over his wife, – but wives were also economic investments as prospective producers of male offspring, who were deemed indispensable for the lasting prestige, prosperity and security of the family.

We must bear in mind that in marriage arrangements, dowry is paid by the bride´s family to the groom´s and sons are responsible for caring for parents in

their old age as well as carrying on the family name and business.[27] Due to this manner of thinking and cultural reality, women were transformed into mere commodities as means of achieving male offspring and prestige in the community; the persona of the women themselves became totally invisible and they were thus with extreme effectiveness forced into insignificancy and nonentity.

An attempt to analyse the bipolar character of an ideology which on the one hand "placed femininity at the very centre of its spiritual foundation" (Bose M. , 2006, pp. min. 40:07-40:13), while on the other hand systematically reducing women to nothingness; does not offer many enlightening insights. This enigma becomes even more difficult to comprehend when considering that throughout history, numerous authorities argued contrarily. It might seem plausible to believe

[27] Despite the 1961 Dowry Prohibition act in Indian civil law and subsequently by sections 304 B and 498 A of the Indian Penal law, (1961); dowry continues to be prevalent with increasing amounts of dowry deaths being reported in the press, and abuse of young brides reaching unprecedented proportions. The prohibition act has proved to be woefully ineffective, as social relationships, attitudes and perceptions remain rooted in the past and demands of the prospective groom, typically, add up to proportionately astronomical amounts; quantities for which parents of daughters spend all their lives saving, starting practically as soon as a daughter is born. The ability to pay a suitor´s dowry demands significantly determines the wellbeing of the prospective bride in her new home, as well as the probability of being able to marry into a well to do and/or appropriate family or not.

that all along history one half of the population effectively succeeded in forwarding their own advancement and power at the expense of the other half. In the case of gender politics in India, it would appear that a large percentage of women were successfully persuaded not only to accept and allow the systematic degradation of their person, status and rights, but were effectively brainwashed by the system of oppression into believing that this, in fact, is the correct and normal state of womanhood (Bose, 2006).

I would like to draw attention to a book review by Rajesh Komath, titled *Religion as a barrier in women´s empowerment*, published in *The Hindu* Reviews section on November 18, 2014. The article reviews the recently published book, Religion, Patriarchy and Capitalism by Jayanti Alam. In his review, Komath outlines Jayanti Alam's view on social practices from a woman´s perspective, based on her own personal experiences. Jayanti Alam, (as cited in Komath, 2013) voices the view that "Capitalism appears as a catalyst in strengthening the practice of patriarchy as wealth accumulates in the hands of the male" (Komath, 2013, p. para. 1). In Alam´s opinion, (as cited in Komath, 2013) the doctrines outlined in Hindu religious scriptures are directly responsible for the currently prevalent mind-set, which continues to be highly discriminatory towards girl babies and women. This in turn is responsible for the bitter practice of female infanticide, increasingly rampant in India, where daughters are viewed as expensive economic burdens and liabilities pertaining to their future husbands; even as they reside in their parents´ home.

Alam (as cited in Komath, 2013) denounces that progress in science and technology has only served as a means of "reverse social dimension," where technology has advanced "female infanticide" into female "foeticide" (Komath, 2013, p. para. 3). She also condemns that "the rigidity in approach towards the code and conduct of the woman is an absolute given" (Komath, 2013, p. para. 3) irrespective of the religion in question.

We can find further evidence of this modern day subjugation and abuse, with apparently religious undertones, in an article by the *BBC Delhi* correspondent, Soutik Biswas, under the heading: *How India treats its Women,* dated 29 December 2012. The article was written following the global outcry and international condemnation of the gang rape and battering of a young physiotherapist/medical student, on 16 December 2012, in a moving bus in Delhi; resulting in the death of the victim after thirteen days in a hospital in Singapore (Mandhana & Trivedi, 2012). Biswas points out that the huge prevalence of selective abortion of female foetuses and female baby infanticide has led to "an appallingly skewed sex ratio." (Biswas, 2012, p. para.3).

So as to further comprehend the deep-seated religious values that shape Indian social norms and gender roles, which seem to be predominantly responsible for the continued, agonizing and formidable struggle towards gender equality and recognition of women´s rights in India; I would like to cite from an extract in *The Guardian*, of Sunny Hundal´s e-book, *India Dishonoured: Behind a nation´s war on its women,* (Hundal, 2013). In his book, Hundal explores the prevalence of

religious beliefs and ideals from centuries past on women and their lives in current India. He states that only sweeping awareness of centuries old religious mythology would be able to guide one to finding the origins to current cultural practices and possibly to solutions which would necessarily have to be grounded in the hugely daunting and challenging task of changing deeply imbedded, uncompromising mind sets. Hundal makes references to the previously mentioned religious scripts, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. He describes The Ramayana as "a key text in the Hindu religion canon," while also stating that

> It is an epic tale of kings and queens, family duty and promises, love and war, tradition and honour. Taught to almost every Indian child from a young age, it puts forward some of the earliest ideals surrounding male and female gender roles that they will encounter: Lord Ram as the epitome of a dutiful son, a good husband and an honourable king; his wife Sita as the archetypal woman – kind, righteous, strong but obedient.
>
> The story of Sita's fate is important not just because the Ramayana is so highly regarded - it also illustrates the huge cultural significance of a woman's 'honour' (Hundal, 2013, pp. para.1-2).

In referring to the other major Hindu religious script mentioned above, The Mahabharata, Hundal declares that

> The Mahabharata, another popular epic tale, has a similar tale to tell about the duty of men and women, the different roles expected of them and the

> importance of tradition. These religious texts, so core to India's social fabric, shape popular perceptions on how women should act (Hundal, 2013, p. para.3).

Within the same article in *The Guardian*, Hundal also cites writer and columnist for the Mint newspaper in India, Salil Tripathi, as saying, (as cited in Hundel, 2013) "texts such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata reinforce the underlying message that "if you want to be a good person, these are the role models to follow" (Hundal, 2013, p. para. 5).

> According to Tripathi: For many of India's Hindus (around 80% of the population), Muslims (14%), Christians (2.5%), Sikhs (2%), Buddhists (1%), Jains (> 1%) and other minorities, religion is a way of living and celebrating, not just a matter of attending a place of worship once a week. It can be extremely difficult to draw a line where religion ends and culture begins; the two have been intricately inter-woven over centuries.
>
> The result – from the viewpoint of many Indians – is a culture that places men and women in different but complementary roles. Social mores, rather than subscribing to western principles of feminist equality, see Indian women set apart, idealised. Ascribed a special – separate – place to men in society, they are placed up high on a pedestal. During one very popular Hindu and Sikh festival for example, Rakhee, sisters tie a thread around their brothers' wrists, who in turn pledge to protect them for life.

> Yet this symbolism that puts women on a pedestal is in fact the problem. Their celebrated position, defined by tradition, swiftly becomes a prison. Convention requires that girls be brought up to be good daughters and later obedient wives, not independent women encouraged to do what they wish. A woman's position both represents the views of society, and reflects her qualities back on it. If she is judged to have brought 'shame' upon herself, she is seen as bringing shame on the entire family and even the community. Her role is reduced to remaining honourable until she can get married, produce children and run the household. By putting women on a pedestal, they are placed in a trap where they have to constantly live up to the expectations of others (Hundal, 2013, pp. para. 6-8).

Obviously, there are many scholars who do not wholly agree with the above analysis or for that matter the suggested interpretation and inferences. Amongst them, is Samhita Arni, the internationally acclaimed writer and expert in Indian mythology, who wrote *The Mahabharata – A child´s view*, at the young age of eleven, which has since been translated into seven languages receiving commendations from many academic bodies, including "one of the Best Published Books of 2004 from the Spanish Ministry of Culture" (Krithika, 2005, p. para.2).

Arni has gone on to retell the stories of major Hindu epics, using her own distinctive prism. In her book titled *Sita´s Ramayana*, Arni narrates the story of The Ramayana from the perspective of Ram´s banished queen Sita. However, she

does not paint Sita as the submissive, hapless woman, a voiceless victim of circumstances, doomed, accepting and resigned to her ill fate, her self- sacrifice being the only option open to her. This of course, is the classical and accepted portrayal of Sita that we have been taught and are accustomed to perceive; however, Arni presents us with a strong woman who challenges the situation she finds herself in, takes intelligent decisions that help her survive and successfully bring up her children as a single mother; despite facing adversity – in this case, the forest to which she is banished – as her chastity is at question.

We shall look at the different takes on the image of Sita later on in this study, when we examine in slightly more detail the actual stories of the epics mentioned. For the moment, what I attempt to highlight is the persistently conflicting and irreconcilable reality of gender discourse and role models within the Indian society. There are numerous, world famous examples of powerful and formidable women, both in Hindu mythology and history, as well as in contemporary society. The invincible goddess *Durga*; *Lakshmi*, the goddess of light and prosperity; *Saraswati*, the goddess of knowledge; *Kali*, the all-powerful; all of whom are revered and worshipped regularly in annual festivals, nationwide. Then of course, there are also eminent names that reverberate at a global level, names such as Indira Gandhi, Arundhati Roy and Mira Nair to mention just three.

In contemporary Indian history, women have achieved international recognition and fame, soaring to unprecedented heights in practically every walk of life. They draw attention to social, political, environmental and innumerable

issues; marking their presence vigorously and actively as academics, activists, artists, writers etc. Thus, they have provided the people of India and continue to offer them countless role models, which shatter the traditional status quo. To follow up with just one example, Indira Gandhi, the granddaughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, became India´s third Prime Minister, following independence in 1947. She was the most significant player in Indian politics during the second half of the 20th century. She was democratically elected into the Prime Minister´s seat, an incredible four times; three consecutive terms from 1966 to 1977, going on to lose the elections, but then being re-elected again in 1980, a position that she held until her assassination in 1984. In 1999, Indira Gandhi was named "*Woman of the Millennium*" in a poll organised by the BBC, (BBC NEWS, 1999); and in 2001, she was voted the greatest Indian Prime Minister, in a poll organised by India Today, (Dasgupta, 2001).

It is clear that India is certainly not short of outstanding women, internationally recognised and applauded for their endeavours; women who have made exceptional contributions and are major players in their chosen pursuits and occupations. However, one cannot ignore the fact that they constitute an elite and privileged minority, making up only a minute percentage of the overall female population in India, many of whom find the doors of opportunity relentlessly obstructed. Even a cursory glance at records of birth, female literacy, and women in formal employment and leadership positions, is enough to draw attention to the challenges that remain unresolved. According to Indiastat.com, (as cited in

Catalyst Knowledge Centre, 2014),[28] despite fluctuating figures across different states, women make up a mere 48.5 % of the population, this figure further drops to as few as 38.2% in some areas, (Catalyst, 2014). These numbers are the result of long term, unchecked and unpunished, gender discrimination, through incidents of female infanticide, foeticide, as well as reduced nutritional and child care quality for girl babies.

In 2011, barely 55% of women were literate compared to 77% of men, with 80% of literacy amongst women in urban populations compared to 59% of rural women (Catalyst, 2014).[29] According to the same source, between 2009 and 2010

[28] On reviewing *Catalyst* website records on March 20, 2019, I have been unable to get access the original reports where the above data is recorded. However, the data on the gender population gap is currently available at (Catalyst, 2018). Documents attesting to the veracity and accuracy of the data provided in referencing *Catalyst* in this part of the study can be found in the United Nations ILO web site: (United Nations Documents on India, 2019), the US Central Intelligence Agency: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html, specifically in the 2012 World Fact book: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/download/download-2012/index.html

[29] On reviewing *Catalyst* website records on March 20, 2019, I have been unable to get access the original reports where the above data is recorded. However, the data on the gender population gap is currently available at (Catalyst, 2018). Documents attesting to the veracity and accuracy of the data provided in referencing *Catalyst* in this part of the

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women made up 26.1% of the rural working population but only 13.8% of the urban working population. As cited in Catalyst, according to the *International Labour Organization, Global Employment Trends 2013,* it is estimated that women amount to 30% of the economically active population of India; however, marking a contradictory tendency, the participation of women in the work force fell from 37% between 2004 and 2005 to 29% in 2009 (Catalyst, 2014).

Also, (as cited in Catalyst, 2014), *The Global Gender Gap report of 2013*, from the World Economic Forum, states that women earn 62% of what their male counterparts earn for the same work. Finally, the report also ranks India at position 124 out of 136 countries, when it comes to women´s economic participation and at the dismal position of 120 in terms of educational opportunities for women (Catalyst, 2014). "In 2013, the Ministry of Law and Justice passed the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act to provide protection against sexual harassment in the workplace" (Catalyst, 2014).

Further examination of the data does not improve the general picture; women occupy an insignificant 3% of legislative, management and senior official positions. According to Anne Marie Francesco and Shalini Mahtani, in their

study can be found in the United Nations ILO web site: (United Nations Documents on India, 2019).

Gender Diversity Benchmark for Asia, 2011, (Francesco & Mahtani, 2011) (as cited in Catalyst, 2014);[30] India is guilty of "the lowest national female work force and the worst leaking pipeline" (Catalyst, 2014) phenomenon.

On examining the presence of women in junior to middle level positions, the numbers in the workplace are: 28.71% of women in junior positions, 14.9% of women in middle positions and 9.32% of women in senior positions (Catalyst, 2014). Looking at the figures on the Bombay Stock Exchange 100, as given by Arpana Banerji, Shalini Mahatani, Dr Ruth Sealy and Professor Susan Vinnicombe, in a study titled: *Standard Charted Bank: Women on Corporate Boards in India (2010),* (as cited in Catalyst, 2014); from 323 positions of executive directorship, an office which normally needs to be held before aspiring to the CEO position, a scant eight posts are occupied by women, amounting to 2.5%. As can be expected, out of 54% of companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange, 100 have not got any women board directors, (Catalyst, 2014).

[30] On reviewing *Catalyst* website records on March 20, 2019, I have been unable to get access the original reports where the above data is recorded. However, the data on the gender population gap is currently available at (Catalyst, 2018). Documents attesting to the veracity and accuracy of the data provided in referencing *Catalyst* in this part of the study can be found in the United Nations ILO web site: (United Nations Documents on India, 2019).

Paradoxically, according to Deepali Bagati and Nancy M. Carter, in a 2010 study titled, "*Leadership Gap in India Inc.: Myths and Realities,* 97.2% of women compared to 95.6% of men seek to occupy positions and professions with increased responsibilities. Similarly, in a study conducted in June 2014, on *Women in National Parliaments,* unsurprisingly, India was positioned at 116 out of 189 countries in terms of the percentage of women they have in Parliaments (Catalyst, 2014).

> Well, comrade, did you see God up there?
>
> Yes, I did see God up there!
>
> Well, comrade, tell us then, what did God look like?
>
> She is black!
>
> (Kinsley, 1989, p. ix).

1.2- HINDU PHILOSOPHY AND IDEOLOGY, DEITIES AND GODDESSES: THE REPRESENTATION, ROLES AND WORSHIP OF *WOMEN*.

David Kinsley makes reference to the above conversation between a reporter for *Tass* news agency and the first USSR cosmonaut, on his return to earth. As Kinsley points out, the irony of the conversation lies in the purposeful supposition by most of the Western world and its main sister religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that the divine is white and male. Rosemary Ruether (as cited in Kinsley, 1989) stated that in Christian theology,

> Starting with the basic assumption that the male is the normative human person and therefore also the normative image of God, all symbols, from God-language and Christology to church and ministry, are shaped by the pervasive pattern of the male as center, the female as subordinate and auxiliary (Kinsley, 1989, p. ix).

However, adhering to the pattern of contradicting realities which seems to prevail in history worldwide, it is also clear that even within the male dominated pantheons, many western religious traditions also offer powerful paradigms of female divinity. One example could be that found in most parts of Spain, where the *Virgin Mary* plays the role of an all-encompassing, supreme divine being. Thus, it is fair to tentatively assume that the struggle for equal status and rights for women and the role of religion in maintaining the status quo of discord, cross culturally; to a larger or lesser extent has many similar patterns, no matter in which direction we cast our gaze.

It was only in the 1920s (Ramusack & Sievers, 1999) that archaeologists initially began to unearth remains of the Indus valley civilization. Despite the vast amount of research and number of scholars involved, ongoing gaps in knowledge and evidence, as well as the complications of interpretation and analysis of documentation that is available, continue to pose enormous challenges. As such, insights into the lives of women as well as many social and intellectual characteristics of the time remain somewhat of an enigma; open to diverse readings by different schools of thought.

It would appear that the origins of the visual aesthetics, ideals of beauty and the graceful, highly refined movements and mime of the modern classical dance school of *Bharatanatyam* can be traced back to the presence of fertility goddesses represented by material remains of figurines with full breasts and hips

dating from 2500 to 1700 B.C.E. (Ramusack & Sievers, 1999). The same figurines are also adorned with intricate and elaborate jewellery, a custom which has clearly been transmitted through the ages. Highly ornamental gold is flaunted by those who can afford it and to this day persists as a highly decisive symbol of wealth and prestige; playing a crucial role in determining not only the social level and status of the wearer and their family, but serving as an elitist monetary value of exchange for social and other transactions, as gifts during auspicious ceremonies such as weddings or births of a son.

In studies previous to the 1980s, one can perceive a general consensus amongst historians that the evidence available seems to indicate a comparatively elevated status of women during the earlier *Vedic* era, than in later periods (Ramusack & Sievers, 1999). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the *Vedas*, which were the principle source of the studies, were passed on through oral traditions of ritual and recitation, and although they were preserved accurately, with almost no variation of content for over 3000 years, through a highly complex system of learning and reciting (Flood, 1996); (O´Flaherty, 2014); the transmission through oral traditions did not necessarily provide a wholly accurate temporal context. As a result, as we have seen from earlier on in this study, there are many conflicting verdicts and versions on the status, religious and social roles of women during these eras.

Most scholars attribute the *Rig Veda,* as being the first of the three *Vedas*, which are also the earliest Hindu texts of ancient India, written in Sanskrit and

composed in northwest India around 1500 BCE. (O´Flaherty, 2014). The two Sanskrit classics of India are embodied in the Rig Veda and The *Mahabharata*. Both these texts are monumental volumes, the Rig Veda being a collection of verses, mantras or hymns of more than 350,000 words, as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, according to O´Flaherty, while the Mahabharata, – which is one of the two prodigious Sanskrit epics, the other one being the *Ramayana* – is approximately ten times longer than the Rig Veda, consisting of a text of 100,000 verses, over three million words, "fifteen times the combined length of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament;" (O´Flaherty, 1988, p. 57).

Although the Mahabharata was preserved for more than two thousand years both orally and in manuscript, apparently the Rig Veda was maintained exclusively as an oral tradition, despite the fact of the use of writing by Hindus for centuries. This is because it was considered to be:

> A sacred magic text, whose power must not fall into the wrong hands. Unbelievers and infidels, Dalits and women, were forbidden to learn Sanskrit, the sacred language, because they might defile or injure the magic power of the words; if the sacred chants were to be spoken by such people, (O´Flaherty, 2014, p. 510).

As a result of the above belief, the Rig Veda was memorized with scrupulous precision by male apprentices, always in the presence of their *guru* or teacher, and was thus protected from adaptation or alteration of any sort.

Notwithstanding, as was made clear by Professor Bose´s lecture, the Rigveda is anything but transparent to scholars and there seems to be evidence of some Vedas which were composed by women, who also played significant roles in carrying out sacrificial rites and wore the sacred thread that bore evidence of their knowledge of the verses, as well as their position and learned status. As cited by Barbara Ramusack, Julia Leslie attributes *Gosha*, Rig Veda X, 39 and 40, *Apala*, Rig Veda VIII, 80 and *Visvavara*, Rig Veda V, 28 to women composers, (Ramusack & Sievers, 1999, p. 19).

As in Greek mythology, in Hinduism there are many gods and goddesses, *Deva and Devi*, in Sanskrit. To name a few, we have *Indra*, the King of gods and the god of rain, *Varuna,* the supreme lord of the cosmos and keeper of divine order, who later faded away with the rise of *Shiva* and *Vishnu* (Naylor, 2000). *Agni* is the god of fire, to whose name the Latin word *ignis* and the English *ignite* can be traced (O´Flaherty, 2014). Many of the gods were seen as the perpetrators of the forces of nature and were also known to manifest human qualities and traits, (Flood, 1996).

According to David Kinsley, goddess worship is a highly prolific practice in the diverse and intricate branches of Hinduism, a profoundly elaborate and unique feature, yet to be fully researched in terms of roles, appearances and significance within the religion, (Kinsley, 1986). An in depth scrutiny of the subject is beyond the scope of this study at this time; nevertheless, a brief overview of some rituals performed by women, their roles in worship, as well as

the general characteristics and features of a couple of the principal goddesses of later Hindu mythology, who dominate religious and cultural practice today; will allow us to understand and translate the use of religious ritual practices as the foundation of vernacular art practice by women in India, past and present.

Some understanding of the perceptions of the goddesses by society might also provide more insights into the continued complexities and contradictions governing the status of women in contemporary India. Kapila Vatsyayan states in the foreword of Wangun Madhu Bazaz´s book that:

> While in most other civilizations the goddess-myths are reminders of a primordial world unrelated to contemporaneity, in India they continue to hold sway at tribal, rural and urban levels in a vast variety of expressions ranging from simple domestic rituals to public celebrations and icons in places of worship" (Wangu, 2003, p. 7).

The Rig Veda is the most appropriate source, according to Kinsley, for the study of goddesses. However, despite the fact that a number of goddesses appear in the verses, none of them are as significant as their male counterparts. The importance of the gods and goddesses was established depending on the number of times that they were mentioned in the mantras and the number of hymns that appeared in their praise and celebration. In early mythology however, it is clear that even the comparatively important goddesses were actually quite minor in comparison to the gods, and wielded very limited power (Kinsley, 1986).

Kinsley also states that in subsequent Hinduism many of the earlier goddesses ceased to exist, while the most significant goddesses of later Hinduism were mentioned very briefly or in passing in the Vedic scripts. Some of the principle goddesses of contemporary Hinduism such as *Parvati, Durga, Kali, Radha and Sita* are barely mentioned in the early Vedic scripts; however, there do seem to be Vedic goddesses such as *Sarasvati*, the goddess of wisdom and learning, who have survived into later Hinduism (Kinsley, 1986).

Another noteworthy development in later Hinduism is the phenomenon of *Sakti or Shakti*. It is implied to exist in the consorts of the gods of earlier Hinduism, specifically in *Indrani*, the consort of Indra, the king of gods, mentioned earlier. However, it is not until later that Shakti develops into the feminine representation of the divine creative power, and command of the gods; responsible for controlling and maintaining life, movement and balance in the universe. There is no easy manner in which to study the history of goddesses in Hinduism. The different incarnations are intertwining and overlap in both time and space. What is not difficult to discern is that the feminine energy of goddess is associated mainly with the life giving elements of water, earth, and vegetation. Classical Indian art reflects this central motif, which has resulted in an artistic tradition easily recognisable, even by the novice onlooker, (Wangu, 2003). Mother earth is symbolic of the giver of life, and is thus translated into mother goddess. She is revered and worshipped as the creator, the protector and also the destroyer; and is represented in richly diverse forms. “The cult of mother goddess

perseveres at the tribal, rural and urban levels. There are countless variations. The image of the "mother" dominates the Indian psyche in numerous forms", (Wangu, 2003, p. 7). See: (1.2) FIGURE - 2 below.

(1.2) FIGURE - 2 A, B & C

A – *Mother Goddess* (*Matrika)*, mid- 6th century, Rajasthan, Tanesara, (Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Retrieved from: https: //www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38203

B – *Mother Goddess*, Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan, India, 6th - 7th century, (Courtesy of National Museum of Korea, Seoul); © Richard Mortel; Retrieved from: (Mortel, 2018).

C – Hindu Goddess *Gauri*, India, Uttaranchal, Almora District, 9th century, (Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art); Gift of Jerry Heymann (M.82.226).
Retrieved from: https://collections.lacma.org/node/243273

1.2.1 LAKSHMI

On examining goddesses and their nature in current Hinduism, one aspect that stands out clearly is that the most representative goddesses are often also consorts of the most important gods. (Kinsley, 1986). The behaviour of the goddesses as consorts of the gods, in many cases, seems to model what is seen as the correct behaviour of wives in society. The essence of *Shri* or *Sri* denoting "splendour, glory, majesty, brilliance and the divine power of auspiciousness," (Rhodes, 2011, pág. 4), is recognized as being of a feminine nature. Subsequently, this positive feminine energy came to be known as *Sri-Laksmi,* or *Lakshmi,* who is one of the most popular goddesses in contemporary society, and is universally worshipped by Hindus of all casts all over India. She is *Vishnu´s* consort and active energy and is a *"model Hindu wife, obediently serving her husband as lord"* (Kinsley, 1986, p. 19).

As a model to emulate, Lakshmi represents what all women might be said to seek; she embodies radiant beauty, splendour and prosperity; both spiritual and material well-being alongside qualities of light and illustriousness. As such, women who show signs of wealth and abundance may be seen as having been blessed by Lakshmi and as enjoying her presence and protection within themselves. She is worshipped and invoked by devotees and is seen to be generous and benevolent, showering her worshippers with fame and prosperity,

dispelling misfortune and neediness. Lakshmi is always portrayed very ornately dressed and bejewelled, usually seated or standing on a lotus flower, the symbol of abundant fertility. According to Kinsley, Sri-Laksmi and the lotus together symbolize "the fully developed blossoming of organic life" (Kinsley, 1986, p. 21). For a sample of the diverse forms of Lakshmi, see: (1.2.1) FIGURE - 3, (1.2.1) FIGURE - 4 and (1.2.1) FIGURE - 6.

The lotus can also be seen as symbolic of the whole universe amongst multiple other associations. It originates in the depth of muddy waters and blossoms above the water; clean and untouched by its surroundings, it represents purity and perfection. Many gods and goddesses are depicted seated or surrounded by lotuses as a sign of their purity and spirituality while the muddy waters represent the dogged sludge of reality. Thus, Sri-Lakshmi personifies a state of spiritual perfection and refinement beyond the limits of our material world. See: (1.2.1) FIGURE - 5.

Another customary portrayal of Lakshmi, often to be found in archaeological sites, is in the presence of elephants spraying her with water. In this form, she is known as *Gaja Laksmi*, one of the oldest sculptures of Gaja Laksmi was excavated from the Sonkh site in Mathura, in the North eastern state of Uttar Pradesh, (Singh U. , 2006). According to Kinsley, the elephants symbolize on one hand, life awarding rain and fertility of the land and crops, and on the other hand, are symbols of the power and authority of royalty. Elephants were an important part of the royal court and entourage in ancient kingdoms,

being the carriers of Kings in ceremonial processions as well as characterising wealth, strength and authority. (Kinsley, 1986). As asserted by Kinsley, bearing in mind the symbolism above, it is likely that the portrayal of Lakshmi encircled by elephants, standing upon and or holding lotuses while being showered with fertilizing rains, is perhaps amongst the most potent and highly charged expressions of goddess to be found. See: (1.2.1) FIGURE - 4.

Lakshmi is said to have followed Vishnu down to earth as *Sita* when he incarnated himself into the avatar of *Rama*; and later as *Radha or Rukmini* when he incarnated himself into *Krishna* (Chandra S. , 2001). Lakshmi has numerous forms, either as different goddess or *avatars,* incarnations, depending on what the need on earth is. As Constantina Rhodes declares, "In world-cycle after world-cycle, Lakshmi and Vishnu descend from Vaikuntha, their heavenly abode, to restore harmony in the creation" (Rhodes, 2011, pág. 5). In this manner, Lakshmi, "in all of her attributes of abundance and splendour, the goddess of prosperity eventually comes to be known by an abundant array of names, all of which lend further dimensions to the human perception of her identity" (Rhodes, 2011, pág. 4). See: (1.2.1) FIGURE - 6.

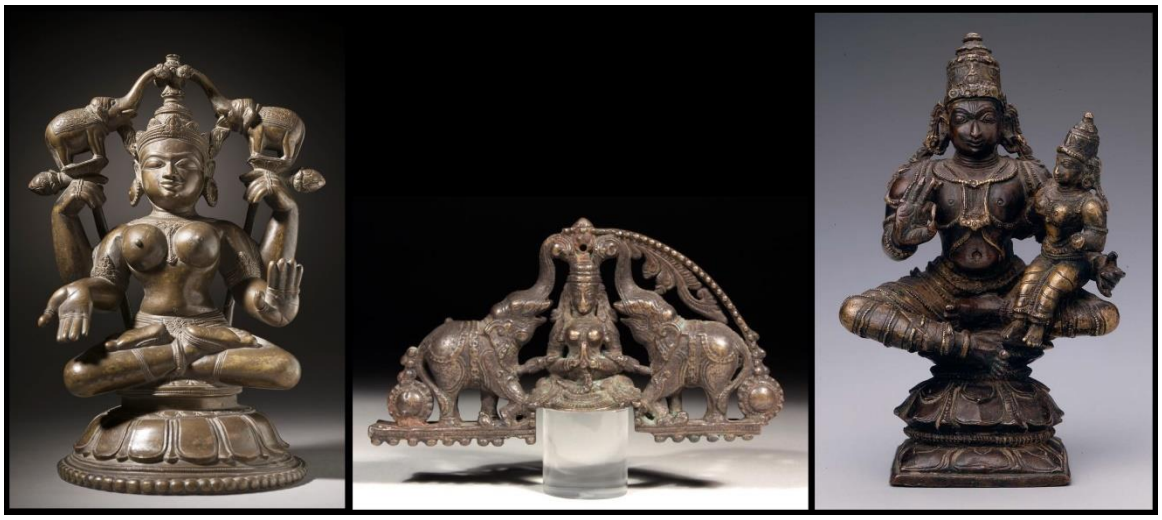
Hindu wedding ceremonies evoke the divine union between Vishnu and Lakshmi, as an epitome of the ideal couple, sharing the same life energy complementing each other. According to Ralph Nicolas, "there is a widely held Hindu concept that the male (purusa) is by himself incomplete and inert, and must

be conjoined with an active, feminine "nature"(*prakrti*) in order to act in the world" (Preston, 1982, p. 193).

(1.2.1) FIGURE - 3 A & B

A – *Goddess Lakshmi with a Rose and a Peacock*, (c.1800 and 1999). [Watercolors on paper with polished tin accents]. Gift of Dr. Bertram H. Schaffner. 19th-century watercolor paintings from India; Kalighat. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum, Asian Art collection.
Retrieved from:https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/159650

B – *Gaja Lakshmi from the Murals of the 11th-century Brihadisvara Temple*, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu; © Ankushsamant.
Retrieved from:_https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tanjore_Paintings_-_Big_temple_01.JPG



(1.2.1) FIGURE - 4 A, B & C

A – *Shri Lakshmi Lustrated by Elephants* │*Gaja-Lakshmi*. India, Odisha, Orissa. (18th century). [Sculpture, Brass], 9 1/4 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/4 in. (23.5 x 13.97 x 13.34 cm). Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Retrieved from: https://collections.lacma.org/node/240634

B – *(Gaja-Lakshmi); Lamp fragment showing Lakshmi bathed with lustral water by elephants*. India, Karnataka, Mysore. (18th century). [Bronze]. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Eilenberg. Courtesy of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri. Retrieved from: https://maa.missouri.edu/media-gallery/detail/98/498

C – *Lakshmi-Narayana* (*Lakshmi seated on Vishnu*. *Nārāyaṇa)* is one of the many forms of Vishnu, consort of Lakshmi. Kerala India,(16th–17th century). [Bronze, copper with brass], 11.6 cm (4 9/16 in.); H: 0.116 cm. Gift of John Goelet. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.
Retrieved from: https://collections.mfa.org/objects/22394/lakshminarayana

(1.2.1) FIGURE - 5 A, B & C

A – *Gaja Lakshmi.* Thanjavur, India. (2nd half of 20th century). [Verre églomisé, paint on glass with added metallic sequins]. Gift of Robert F. Bussabarger. Lent by the Museum of Anthropology. Courtesy of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri.
Retrieved from: https://maa.missouri.edu/media-gallery/detail/98/438

B & C – Raja Ravi Varma, (1848-1906). *Goddess Lakshmi*. [Oleograph]. Current location unknown.
Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravi_Varma-Lakshmi.jpg

(1.2.1) FIGURE - 6 A, B & C

A – *Shri Lakshmi*. Kerala, India, (16th century) [Sculpture, Copper alloy], 14 x 4 5/8 x 3 in. (35.56 x 11.75 x 7.62 cm). Gift of Mrs. Harry Lenart in honor of the museum's 40th anniversary. Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Retrieved from: https://collections.lacma.org/node/211644

B – *Lakshmi* and *Vishnu* at Shaivism Hoysaleswara Hindu temple, Halebidu Karnataka, 12th-century. © Ms Sarah Welch.
Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:12th-century_Vishnu_and_Lakshmi_at_Shaivism_Hindu_temple_Hoysaleswara_arts_Halebidu_Karnataka_India_2.jpg

The carved soapstone panels recount legends from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. Vedic deities like Agni, Indra and Surya, as well as the various avatars of Vishnu and the Hindu goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, Durga and Kali, amongst others are to be found. The sculptures are three dimensional, as such the panels usually materialise as almost whole statues. The Panels are ingeniously laid out, each one leading into one another. The different perspectives of the panels display the diverse parts of the legend. As such, one panel showing one story or legend leads into another panel with an alternative viewpoint of the same column, wall or corner, showing another part of the same legend.

C – *Lakshmi*. South India, Vijayanagar, (15th century). [Bronze]. Gift of Dr. Samuel Eilenberg. Courtesy of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri. Retrieved from: https://maa.missouri.edu/media-gallery/detail/98/495

Lakshmi is portrayed in the graceful “three bends” pose (*tribhanga*). In her left hand she holds a half-open lotus bud. “She wears a tall ornamented crown, earrings, and numerous necklaces and armlets. Flowers adorn her shoulders, and a band supports her full breasts. A multi-stranded girdle festooned with tassels supports the dhoti that she wears about her lower body. There is a small halo, indicating divinity, behind her head. The two square lugs on each side of the base were meant to hold an ornamented aureole (full body halo).
The beauty of the goddess and richness of her attire suggest the abundance and wellbeing that she bestows upon her devotees. She is particularly worshipped at the time of the New Year for prosperity in the coming year, and at the festival of Diwali in the autumn when lamps are lit in houses to chase away misfortune. Large sculptures like this are placed in public temples, but during certain festivals they are paraded in the streets.

Artisans follow established canons of iconography, pose, and proportion to craft such images. Large statues and small figurines can have a nearly identical appearance. The technical expertise of the artist who made this statue is exquisite”. (Curators of the University of Missouri, 2019).

1.2.2 THE GODDESS DURGA, KALI AND OTHERS…

The goddess *Durga*, which means inaccessible in Sanskrit, is another of the highly revered incarnations of Devi and Shakti in Hindu India. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Kinsley describes her as being

> One of the most impressive and formidable goddesses of the Hindu pantheon – and one of the most popular – […] a great battle queen with many arms, each of which wields a weapon. She rides a fierce lion and is described as irresistible in battle" (Kinsley, 1986, p. 95).

In mythology her role is to overcome the evil forces which endanger cosmic equilibrium and stability. One of the many stories behind the creation of Durga is that she was brought into existence by *Brahma*, Vishnu and Shiva as a means of joining their strengths together so as to be able defeat the buffalo demon, *Mahishasura*, who was invincible to all but a woman.

> This great mass of light and strength congealed into the body of a beautiful woman, whose splendour spread throughout the universe. The parts of her body were formed from the male gods. Her face was formed from Siva, her hair from Yama, her arms from Vishnu, and so on. Similarly, each of the male deities from whom she had been created gave her a weapon. Siva gave her a trident; Vishnu gave her his discus; Vayu, his bow and arrows; and so

> on. Equipped by the gods and supplied by the god Himalaya with a lion as her vehicle, Durgā, the embodied strength of the gods, then roared mightily, causing the earth to shake (Kinsley, 1989, p. 5).

Durga is said to be greater and more powerful than any of her creators as she embodies their collective powers while also being the authentic source of their inner strength. She is also said to have been invoked by Vishnu to help protect the infant lord Krishna from a demon king. There are many myths alluding to Durga's strength and prowess in the defeat of evil in all its forms. Her creation is as a result of the need to overcome a crisis which the gods are unable to carry out on their own. She is created as a superior female warrior and she herself creates other female warriors to help her in her battles. The deity *Kali* is perhaps the most well-known of her ferocious helpers. Durga is usually depicted riding a tiger or lion while defeating Mahishasura. See: (1.2.2) FIGURE - 7 and (1.2.2) FIGURE - 8.

Later on Durga transforms into *Parvati* who is Shiva´s consort and fulfils the role of the good wife and mother. See: (1.2.2) FIGURE - 10 A. The principle festival dedicated to Durga is *Durga Puja.* It takes place over a period of nine days and is also known as *Navaratra* – meaning nine nights in Sanskrit. Durga Puja is followed immediately afterwards by the celebration of *Dasara*. During the festivities Durga is inevitably represented in her form of slayer of the demon Mahishasura. With her different arms bearing her weapons, she is seen thrusting

her trident into Mahishasura's chest. Hence, a significant part of the festival celebrates Durga's victory in battle over the demon buffalo. "The Durga Puja festival clearly asserts Durga´s central role as a battle queen and the regulator of the cosmos," (Kinsley, 1986, p. 106). Below: (1.2.2) FIGURE - 7 & 8 C.

(1.2.2) FIGURE - 7 A, B & C

A – *Durga riding a tiger*, (n.d.). [Gouache on paper]. Courtesy of and © The Trustees of the British Museum. Retrieved from: https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=288309001&objectId=182704&partId=1

B – *Durga Devi* (*Shakti)*, (n.d.). Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc. Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Durga

C – *Durga Mahisasuramardini,* (possibly early 18th century). Goddess Durga portrayed inn battle with Mahishasura, the buffalo-demon while the gods observe the event hidden in the clouds. Guler School of miniature painting. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Durga_Mahisasuramardini.JPG

(1.2.2) FIGURE - 8 A, B & C

A – *Durga*. Rajasthan, India, (1000s AD), [sandstone]. Courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Durga,_Rajasthan,_India,_1000s_AD,_sandstone_-_Dallas_Museum_of_Art_-_DSC05087.jpg

B – *Four-Armed Durga Seated on a Lion*, possibly Uttar Pradesh, India, (9th century). 22 1/2 in. (57.2 cm). Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky. Courtesy of and ©Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Retrieved from: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60005338

C – *Mahishasurmardini Durga*, Patan, Gujarat, India, (11th century). Photograph by Ayan Ghosh ©Sahapedia. Retrieved from: https://www.sahapedia.org/sculptures-of-the-mother-goddess#lg=1&slide=0

"Perhaps the most intricate and well preserved *Mahishasurmardini* in India is this carving from the Ran-ki-Vav stepwell in Patan, Gujarat. The step well, constructed in the 11th century by Solanki Queen Udayamati, was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2014. The construction of step wells, called vav (also wav) or baoli in western India, formed a very important part of royal projects and philanthropy, in providing drinking water to citizens and along trade routes. These wells also offered a place for rest and prayers. In Hinduism, water has always been considered sacred, therefore step wells were constructed like inverted temples with a profusion of sculptures of gods and goddesses from the brahmanical pantheon and stories from the Hindu epics. This Mahishasurmardini is notable for the deep carving, making the statue almost three dimensional. Durga is holding Mahishasura by his hair as he emerges from the decapitated buffalo" (Sahapedia, 2017, p. 1).

According to Kinsley, the festivities of the worship of Durga in her form of warrior goddess pertain to a tradition of worship by rulers praying for victory in their battles. *Dasara* the festival immediately after Durga Puja used to be a moment for the celebration of military and royal strength and prowess as well as the opportunity to appeal to Durga for military superiority and success in future battles. Durga is also said to have played a part in the victory of the *Pandava brothers* in the *Mahabharata* and Rama´s battle with the demon *Ravana* in the *Ramayana* (Kinsley, 1986, p. 108). According to the scriptures, sage *Narada* advised Rama to solicit Durga´s help in winning the battle against Ravana and rescuing Sita; by performing the rites of Durga Puja and Navaratra so as to gain military superiority over his enemies. Similarly, (as cited in Kinsley, 1986), in earlier periods, Durga was also evoked and worshipped in festivals by Indra, Shiva and Vishnu, for the likewise purpose of ensuring victory in their battles.

Apart from the military might that is sought after in Durga Puja, the worship of Durga is also associated with invoking crop fertility and an abundant harvest. Thus, Durga is also adored as the goddess of "plant fertility […] Durga is not merely the power inherent in the growth of crops but the power inherent in all vegetation" (Kinsley, 1986, p. 111). In invoking and adoring the goddess in her form as the source of plant fertility and power, she is sanctified with water from holy rivers as well as plant juices and oils. The offering of blood sacrifices is another of the unique characteristic of Durga Puja. From historical texts and sources, it would appear that Durga has a thirst for blood that goes beyond the

battlefield and often her devotees – in this particular case those pertaining to indigenous tribal societies – will offer her blood in the form of animal sacrifices, (Kinsley, 1986), to help her replenish and maintain her mighty power and strength which is the source of nourishment for all the rest of life.

In her role as protector, Durga is also invariably depicted surrounded by her four children who are the gods *Karttikeya* and *Ganesha* and the goddesses *Sarasvati* and Lakshmi. See: (1.2.2) FIGURE - 9. Durga Puja is usually celebrated during the harvest season between September and October. As per various texts, historically, Durga seems to have originated amongst the indigenous cultures of India. She would appear to have been originally connected to the non-Aryan, tribal and peasant cultures and their customs of consumption of meat and alcohol.

In the form of Durga, the goddess reverses the traditional image of the Hindu woman. She is neither submissive nor subordinate to male deities; she does not participate in any of the traditional tasks allocated to women and is superior in battle against gods as well as demons. "In many respects Durga violates the model of the Hindu woman", (Kinsley, 1986, p. 97). Most significantly, she does not lend her *Shakti* to a male consort to help him become stronger but takes from the male gods, her creators, their strength, to fight the necessary battles in order to maintain cosmic order and peace. "They give up their inner strength, fire, and heat to create her and in doing so surrender their potency to her", (Kinsley, 1989, p. 8).

There are numerous mythological stories that highlight Durga´s reversal of the traditionally dictated role of women in Hinduism. She has many would-be suitors amongst her opponents; infatuated and bewitched they are keen to marry her as opposed to fighting her. Kinsley makes reference to a dialogue between the goddess and the demon *Mahishasura*, where he insists on asserting that as a woman she is "too delicate to fight, too beautiful for anything but love play, and must come under the protection and guidance of a man in order to fulfill her proper proclivities" (Kinsley, 1989, p. 8).

In response to such situations the goddess might explain to her wooer that in order to win her hand, her family requires her prospective husband to defeat her in battle. Upon entering into battle with Durga, the would-be husband is annihilated. In other variants of the myth, she simply rejects him outright with fierce warnings of ripping him to pieces in battle, which he ignores and prefers to interpret as passionate metaphors of love, thus blindly going into battle with her. Durga the goddess is not under the wing or protection of a male deity as per the dictation and norms of traditional Hindu law for a woman. Neither is Durga a helpless delicate female. She is portrayed as completely independent, irresistibly beautiful, powerful and seductive. She does not use her charm and beauty to win an eligible husband but beguiles her enemies into mortal combat.

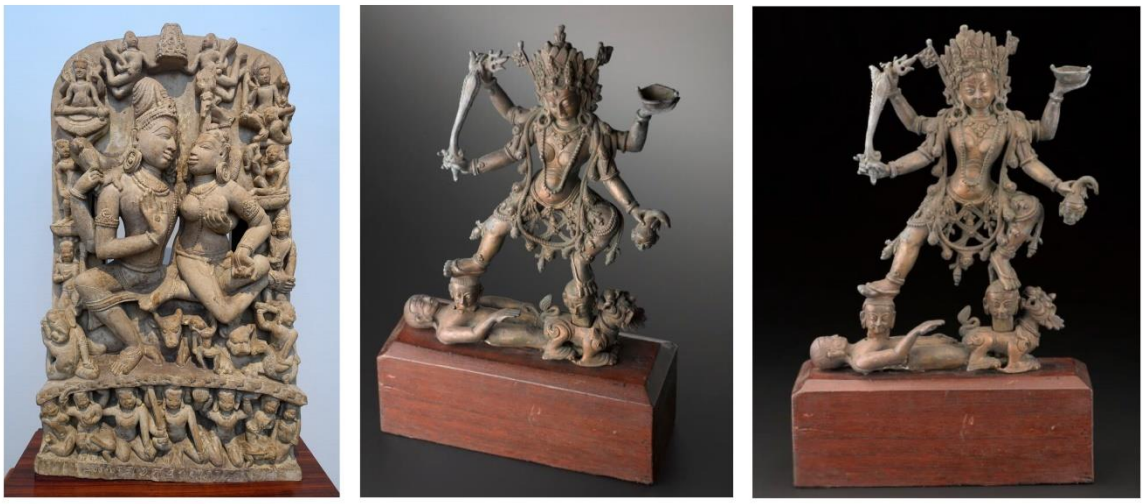
(1.2.2) FIGURE - 9 A, B & C

A – *Durga holding the infant Krishna* (*Deva Gostha)*, (c.1885–95). [Lithograph with varnish print], 5 7/8 × 11 7/8 in. (40.3 × 30.2 cm). Gift of David E. Stutzman and John D. Lamb. Courtesy of and © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/722753

"Durga presents her maternal side, offering the infant Krishna sweets from a bowl. The divine pair sit on her lion vehicle (*vahana)* set on marble paved floor and against a golden aureole *(prabha*) which has forest landscape painted on the interior and heavenly clouds populated by the gods in the outer register. This framing device evokes the portable shrines constructed in Bengal for the Durga Puja festival. The presiding gods are attended by Lakshmi, goddess of wealth with Vishnu, seen left, and Saraswati, goddess of learning, along with Shiva and Brahma, to the right. Below are Ganesha and Skanda riding his peacock, and in the foreground Krishna's childhood friends play with two cows and a calf" (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–2019).

B – This is a modern, brightly coloured, popular, calendar/poster art depiction of Durga, one that is easily found in most homes and in public spaces. Durga is presented in her classic form; armed, ornately bejewelled in a luxurious gold setting she is mounted on her tiger. Alongside also are Saraswati, the goddess of learning, Lakshmi and Kali in the foreground.
Retrieved from: https://www.etsy.com/listing/598428851/best-seller-maa-durga-with-golden-zari?ref=shop_home_active_9&frs=1

C – *Durga Puja goddess*. The festival is celebrated in grandest pomp and ceremony with elaborate rituals, using highly decorated effigies of the goddess as well as young girls dressed up as Durga. ©Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Belur Math.
Source: https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/the-history-of-the-durga-puja-festival/



(1.2.2) FIGURE - 10 A, B &C

A – *Shiva* and *Parvati*, central India, (11th -12th century AD). [Sandstone]. Courtesy of the Matsuoka Museum of Art - Tokyo, Japan. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Siva_and_Parvati,_Central_India,_11th-12th_century_AD,_sandstone_-_Matsuoka_Museum_of_Art_-_Tokyo,_Japan_-_DSC07141.JPG

As *Parvati*, *Durga* assumes her form of the beautiful and loving wife of Shiva, the benevolent goddess of fertility.

B & C – *Kali standing over the prostate body of Shiva*, Nepal, (1801-1900). [Bronze on mahogany]. Courtesy of and © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum. Retrieved from: https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co122625/statue-of-god-kali-on-prostrate-body-of-god-siva-statue

> […] as a beautiful young woman who slays demons seeking to be her lovers and who exists independent of male protection or guidance; Durgā represents a vision of the feminine that challenges the stereotyped view of women found in traditional Hindu law books. She perhaps suggests the extraordinary power that is repressed in women who are forced into

> submissive and socially demeaning roles. In her role reversal, she exists outside normal structures and provides a version of reality that potentially, at least, may be refreshing and socially invigorating (Kinsley, 1989, p. 8).

The goddess Kali would appear to be one of the main aides that Durga calls upon during her battles. Kali is usually portrayed as extremely fearsome, dark skinned and unkempt looking; she has long tangled hair and is normally naked, wearing only a girdle of severed arms, a long dangling necklace of skulls or freshly severed heads and a tiger skin. She is usually seen it the area of battle and is said to be a "furious combatant who gets drunk on the hot blood of her victims" (Kinsley, 1986, p. 116). Kali seems to incarnate Durga´s storm and fury. According to the scriptures, (as cited in Kinsley, 1986), Kali was also seen to have personified the anger of Parvati; Shiva´s peaceful consort as well as Sita, wife of Rama, during episodes of conflict and battle.

Kali is considered to be dominant over Siva, who might be considered to be her partner as she incarnates the anger of both Sati and Parvati who are Siva´s consorts, in different textual temporalities. Kali is normally portrayed dancing over Siva´s prostrate body. She can be said to be, "a goddess who threatens stability and order" (Kinsley, 1986, p. 120). Although she is summoned to protect and help defeat enemies, she is said to lose control and often destroy that which she is supposed to protect. As such, she is considered to be dangerous, untamed by laws or any sort of social or moral order, she is said to represent the "embodied

wrath and fury, a frightening, dangerous dimension of the divine feminine that is released when these goddesses become enraged" (Kinsley, 1986, p. 120). Kali conjures up the sentiments of fear, terror and destruction while representing the inevitable reality of death as everyone´s final destiny. See: (1.2.2) FIGURE - 10 B & C and (1.2.2) FIGURE - 11

In his analysis of the figure of Kali in the context of the tradition of Hinduism, David Kinsley points out that she has managed to maintain the characteristic imagery and personality traits that associate her principally with blood and death. For the traditionally austere Hindus the mortality that death and blood embody is highly polluting. However, Kali forces her puritanical devotees and followers to come face to face with the crudeness of the reality of death. Although death is acknowledged as an obvious and inevitable part of the final destiny of every one´s existence, orthodox Hindus deal with it using highly ritualized and symbolic ceremonies of purification, rites based possibly on what is seen as the correct, clean and orderly manner in which to transcend and fulfil the passing of life.

(1.2.2) FIGURE - 11 A, B & C

A – Raja Ravi Varma, (1890). *Smashana Kali.*

These are various versions of Kali said to have been painted by Raja Ravi Varma. Courtesy of the Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation, Bengaluru. Retrieved from: Google Arts & Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/smashana-kali-ravi-varma-press/lQFmgw3XLCcnEQ

B – Retrieved from: https://www.ancient.eu/image/1332/kali/ Uploaded by Mark Cartwright
C – Retrieved from: https://www.etsy.com/nz/listing/622632316/kali-by-raja-ravi-varma-indian-art

Bearing in mind that alongside life, blood and death are never too far away, Kali provides the Hindu tradition with a means of dealing with the appearance of blood and death unexpectedly; she reminds the austere Hindu that there are many parts of reality that are uncontrollable, that are not predictable, and cannot be purified, that life itself is essentially chaotic and confused, despite society´s attempts to maintain order. Kali is therefore the face of an alternative society, providing a clearer, more complete and true picture of our existence.

1.2.3 THE RAMAYANA: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RAMA AND SITA; REFLECTION ON SOCIETY

Sita, wife of *Ram*a, around whose fate extensive parts of the *Ramayana* – sage Valmiki´s major epic – revolves, (Narayan, 2006/1972)[31] is perhaps one of the most central goddess figures of Hindu mythology. Valmiki´s Ramayana is a poem made up of 24000 verses, comprising 48000 lines, composed between the periods 200 BC and 200 AD. (Aveling, 2012). In his introduction to The Ramayana R. K. Narayan asserts:

> I am prepared to state that almost every individual among the five hundred million living in India [in 1971] is aware of the story of the Ramayana in some measure or other. Everyone of whatever age, outlook, education, or station in life knows the essential part of the epic and adores the main figures in it (Narayan, 2006/1972, p. xxiii).

At the beginning of Narayan´s Shortened Modern Prose version of the epic, Pankaj Mishra recounts how in the summer of 1988 when the televised serial

[31] See: (Goldman Robert P. (Translator) (1990), (1994), (1996)" The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India: *Balakanda, Kiskindhakanda,* & *Sundarakanda,"* Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

version of the epic came to an end after having aired for well over a year on *Doordashan*, India´s state-owned television channel; sanitation workers all through North India went on strike demanding that the federal government sponsor further episodes of the story. Over eighty million people tuned into the weekly episode on Sunday mornings when "the streets in all towns and cities emptied [...] as the serial went on air. In villages with no electricity people usually gathered round a rented television set powered by a car battery", (Narayan, 2006/1972, p. vii). *Diwali or Deepavali*, meaning the 'festival of lights', is celebrated between mid-October and November, commemorating Rama´s return from exile after fourteen years. It is the most important annual Indian festival and also marks the Hindu New Year. Lasting for five days, lights and candles are lit up in every corner also in honour of the goddess Lakshmi – the goddess of light – and it is comparable to Christmas in the West.

The Ramayana is the story of the divinity and mortal life of king of Ayodha, Rama and his wife Sita. Sita represents the epitome of wifely goodness, dedication, self-sacrifice, courage, purity and loyalty to her husband, against all odds and unjustness. Both Rama and Sita are incarnations of Vishnu and Lakshmi. In North India, Rama and Sita are seen as the ultimate divine couple adored by millions of Hindus. Sita exemplifies the supreme model of the virtuous Hindu wife who fulfils Manusmriti to the very last letter. As asserted by Aveling. See: (1.2.3) FIGURE - 12 and (1.2.3) FIGURE - 13 A & B.

> The story of Sita´s sufferings, her faithfulness, her second banishment in the desolate forest, and despite this, her tremendous courage and the lofty sense of honour and grace with which she faces her husband and the court at the end, are stories fed with religious zeal to every little girl in all Hindu homes. There is no character in the literature of the Hindus, or perhaps of all mankind, loftier than Sita – the embodiment of womanly love, truth and devotion (Aveling, 2012, pp. 26-27).

Sally J. Sutherland, cites a study carried out in the Northern state of Uttar Pradesh, by P. Pratab,[32] in which, out of "a list of twenty four goddesses, literary heroines and famous women of history" (Sutherland, 1989, p. 63), the vast majority of the population consulted chose Sita as their "ideal female role model" (Sutherland, 1989, p. 63); (Kakar, 1981, p. 63). Sutherland further points out that the fact that a mythological figure, over two thousand years old who still exerts such an influence and prominence on the lives of people in India is not only highly compelling, but really does warrant her share of academic and scholarly attention. For an iconographic comparison of the goddesses Lakshmi, Durga and Sita see: (1.2) FIGURE - 16.

[32] (Pratab P.) "The Development of Ego Ideal in Indian Children," unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Banaras Hindu University.

Sita is known as the daughter of mother earth – the goddess *Bhumi,* – she was said to have been found by King Janaka, in a furrow in a recently ploughed field in Janakpurdham, in the region of Mithila, now in Nepal, (Sutherland, 1989). The Ramayana is divided into three parts, (Aveling, 2012). The first part narrates the story of the events that led up to Rama´s relinquishment of the throne and self-imposed exile. See: (1.2.3) FIGURE - 13 A.

The second part goes into the abduction of Sita and the ensuring war and defeat of her abductor, the evil demon King *Ravana* of Lanka after four years. Finally, the third part relates the questioning of Sita´s chastity by the people of Ayodha, due to the fact that Sita had been abducted and held captive; her trial by fire–where she walks through flames on burning coal, coming through unscathed – to prove that she remained untouched by another man; – and finally, Rama´s refusal to allow her to stay in the kingdom, despite being pregnant with twins. This culminates in Sita's banishment to the forest once again, this time by Rama himself, so as to appease his people. See: (1.2.3) FIGURE - 14 and (1.2.3) FIGURE - 15 A & B. When Ram finally wants Sita to come back to him, on beholding his strong grown sons, she refuses, and instead asks to be taken back into the arms of Bhumi, her mother earth; (Aveling, 2012); (Narayan, 2006/1972), upon which the ground below her feet opens up and swallows her.

As Sutherland highlights, the adoration of Sita is quite remarkable in as much as there are other divine heroines in the great epics of India, such as *Draupadi, Savitri, Sakuntala,* who are equally put to test, suffering similar

atrocities as Sita; yet it would seem that Sita is the figure that commands the most idolization and reverence from devotees.

According to Kinsley, Sita´s person is defined exclusively in terms of her relationship with her husband Ram. In the Ramayana and in the worship of Rama

> She is portrayed, from a clearly androcentric point of view, as the ideal Hindu wife, whose every thought revolves around her husband. For Sītā, Rāma is the center of her life. She is always steadfast in her loyalty to him. His welfare, reputation, and wishes are uppermost in her mind. In the Manu-dharma-śāstra the ideal wife is described as a woman who always remains faithful to her husband, no matter what his character might be: "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshiped as a god by a faithful wife" (5.154). The same text, commenting on the necessity for protecting women throughout their lives, says: "Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (9.3). Sītā is the ideal pativratā, the wife devoted entirely to her husband. In her selfless devotion and sexual fidelity, the pativratā nourishes an inner heat that both purifies her and provides her with a destructive weapon that can be used against those who might threaten her purity (Kinsley, 1989, p. 97).

In the Ramayana, Sita´s virtue and prowess as *the perfect wife,* as dictated by Manusmriti, is tested and questioned on numerous occasions. Sita undergoes multiple trials and sacrifices, but even after having been subjected to these ordeals and having overcome them with complete acceptance and absolute humility, eventually she is obliged to ask her mother, the earth, to open up and swallow her; in order to save herself further pain and injustice, and so as to prove her worth without the shadows of doubt, (Kinsley, 1989); (Sutherland, 1989). See: (1.2.3) FIGURE - 14 A & B and (1.2.3) FIGURE - 15 B.

> In the Hindu tradition, a woman is taught to understand herself primarily in relation to others. She is taught to emphasize in the development of her character what others expect of her. It is society that puts demands upon her, primarily through the agents of relatives and in-laws, and not she who places demands upon society that she be allowed to develop a unique, independent destiny. A central demand placed upon women, particularly vis-à-vis males, is that they subordinate their welfare to the welfare of others. Hindu women are taught to cultivate an attitude that identifies their own welfare with the welfare of others, especially that of their husbands and children. "In the bratas, the periodical days of fasting and prayer which unmarried girls keep all over India, the girl's wishes for herself are almost always in relation to others; she asks the boons of being a good daughter, good wife, good daughter-in-law, good mother, and so forth. Thus, in addition to the 'virtue' of self-effacement and self-sacrifice, the feminine

> role in India crystallizes a woman's connections to others, her embeddedness in a multitude of familial relationships (Kinsley, 1989, p. 106).

Amongst Hindu Indians, as we have seen earlier, Sita continues to be enormously admired, worshipped and revered. It would seem then that Sita, the submissive, docile, helpless goddess, wife of Rama, dependent on her male relatives for every move, and continuously needing to prove her chastity; is as such, a permanent reminder and influence on the psych of the highly religious population of Hindu Indians, as to the appropriate position and behaviour to be maintained by women. See: (1.2) FIGURE - 16.

> In inculcating the nature of the ideal woman in India, Sītā plays an important role, perhaps the dominant role of all Hindu mythological figures. The Rāmāyaṇa, either in its original Sanskrit version or in one of several vernacular renditions, is well known by almost every Hindu. Many of the leading characters have come to represent Hindu ideals. [...] Sītā represents all the qualities of a good woman and ideal wife. Although other goddesses, such as Pārvatī and Lakṣmī, and other heroines from Hindu mythology, such as Sāvitrī and Damayantī, express many of these qualities, Sītā is by far the most popular and beloved paradigm for wifely devotion, forbearance, and chastity (Kinsley, 1989, pp. 106, 107).

Kinsley goes on to further elaborate that the legend of Sita is related repeatedly amongst Hindus in both social and religious gatherings, through literature, theatre, songs, film, as well as expressions which embody

> [...] the ideal feminine identity she incorporates through the many everyday metaphors and similes that are associated with her name. Thus, 'She is as pure as Sita' denotes chastity in a woman, and 'She is a second Sita,' the appreciation of a woman's uncomplaining self-sacrifice (Kinsley, 1989, p. 107).

From the moment that babies are born they perceive, according to Jerome Bruner, (as cited in Kinsley, 1989, p. 107), "a corpus of images and models that provide the pattern to which the individual may aspire, a range of metaphoric identities." According to Kinsley, "this range, in the case of a Hindu woman, is condensed in one model, and she is Sita" (Kinsley, 1989, p. 107). See: (1.2.3) FIGURE - 12(1.2.3) FIGURE - 14 and (1.2.3) FIGURE - 15.

(1.2.3) FIGURE - 12 A & B

A – *Ram* and *Sita* with *Lakshman* (Ram's brother) and *Hanuman* kneeling (The monkey god who rescues Sita from the demon king Ravana, as per the *Ramayana*) in the foreground. This is the typical, brightly coloured calendar art depiction of the gods found today in most Hindu homes and public spaces, based on Raja Ravi Varma's painting style.
Retrieved from : https://www.ebay.com/itm/Vintage-Calendar-Print-Hindu-God-Goddess-Ram-Laxman-Bharat-Sita-Hanuman-op-335-/273786174813

B – Statues of *Ram, Sita, Lakshman* and *Hanuman* similar to the ones depicted above are to be found in temples all around the country. This particular picture is from the Iskcon temple in Mumbai which receives thousands of visitors daily.
Retrieved from: http://www.iskconjuhu.com/2012/06/14/

(1.2.3) FIGURE - 13 A & B

A – *Rama, Sita, Hanuman* (kneeling) and *Lakshmana*, before Sita's abduction and the battle with *Ravana* to rescue her. India, 18th century.
Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sita

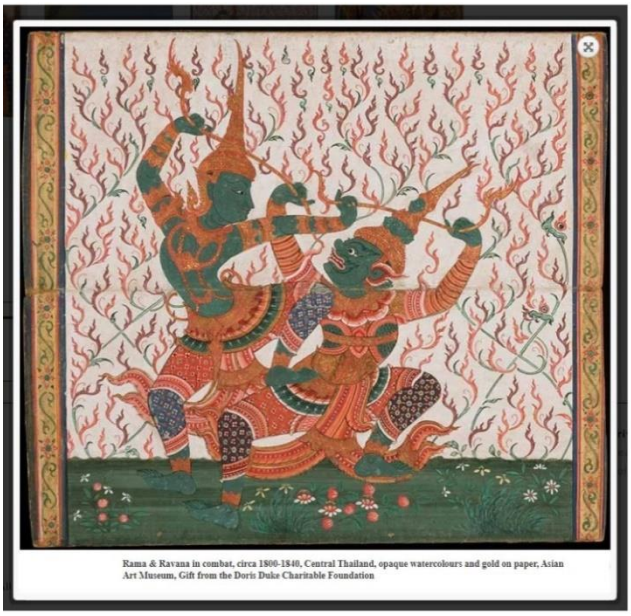
B – *Rama*, *Sita*, and *Lakshmana* commence life in Rama's self-imposed exile in the forest. India, Punjab Hills, kingdom of Kangra, (c.1800–1810). [Opaque watercolour, gold and silver on paper]. Part of the Ramayana in Indian Painting exhibition at the MET, August 10, 2019–August 23, 2020. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Retrieved from: https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2019/sita-and-rama
https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/at-new-yorks-metropolitan-museum-of-art-ramayana-comes-alive-in-a-stunning-exhibition-7271731.html

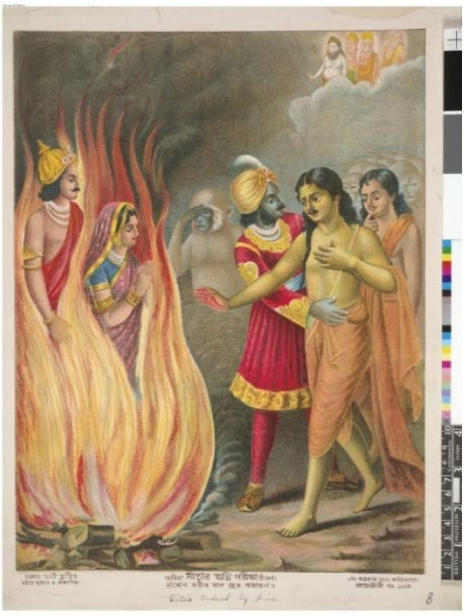
(1.2.3) FIGURE - 14 A & B

A – Raja Ravi Varma, (1895), *Ravana Sita Jathayu*. Painting depicting Sita's abduction by Ravana. [Oil on canvas]. Courtesy of Sri Chitra art gallery, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravi_Varma-Ravana_Sita_Jathayu.jpg

B – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.), *Sita in Exile*.
Retrieved from:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sitas_Exile_by_Raja_Ravi_Varma_(1848_-_1906).jpg

These paintings by Raja Ravi Varma depict Sita's abduction and exile after Rama banishes her to the forest pregnant with twins, in order to appease questions regarding her purity after her abduction by Ravana. There is in this tale the direct implication that Sita is wholly responsible and to blame for her possible abuse and rape by Ravana following her abduction and that she has as a result been rendered impure and unworthy of Rama. The story offers clear indications as to why rape victims in India are often treated with terrible callousness and why victim blaming in cases of rape is so embedded in Indian society.





(1.2.3) FIGURE - 15 A & B

A – *Rama and Ravana in combat*, (c 1800-1840), Central Thailand. [Opaque watercolours and gold on paper]. Asian Art Museum, Gift from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.
Retrieved from: http://asianartnewspaper.com/the-rama-epic/#prettyphoto[group-995]/2/

B – Untitled. Sita walks through fire unscathed to prove her purity to Rama and the people after her abduction. She is still banished to the forest where she has her twin sons. Rama is being held back even though he is the one who insists on having the fire lit. The gods witness the scene from above. [Colour lithograph, lettered, inscribed and numbered 8, mounted on cloth]. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Retrieved from:
https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=135338001&objectid=1634225

(1.2) FIGURE - 16

Lakshmi, *Durga*, and *Sita* with *Rama*. Bengal India, (c. 1862). [Watercolor on paper], 7 7/8 x 12 7/8 in. (20 x 32.7 cm). Acquired through the George and Mary Rockwell Fund. © Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. Retrieved from: https://museum.cornell.edu/collections/asian-pacific/south-asia/lakshmi-durga-and-sita-rama

The facial expressions on this triptych depiction of *Lakshmi*, *Durga* and *Sita* (with *Rama*), clearly show the differences in personality of the goddesses. While Lakshmi and Durga stare assertively and confidently ahead, looking the onlooker directly in the eye, Sita keeps her eyes lowered; both her facial expression and body language are demure and submissive, clear indications of her obedient and dutiful character and behaviour.

1.2.4 THE MAHABHARATA: DRAUPADI; INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DISROBING/UNDRESSING OF DRAUPADI

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen rather humorously declares, "Prolixity is not alien to us in India. [...] We do like to speak" (Sen A. , 2005, p. 3). Both the Mahabharata and Ramayana demonstrate this particular Indian trait. The Mahabharata is about seven times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey together (Sen A. , 2005). It is esteemed to date back to about 1600BC and has been declared as being the world's longest poem with 100.000 stanzas in verse, composed into eighteen books (Narayan, 2006/1972). According to Narayan, there are numerous versions and discrepancies as to the exact date and origins of the Mahabharata as well as authorship; However, Sage Vyasa – who is the narrator in the epic, relating the stories to *Ganesh* – is usually attributed as being the most likely composer of the work, (Narayan, 2006/1972); (Sengupta D. , 2014).

Amartya Sen states that both epics offer their readers a highly enriching and intellectually stimulating experience, made up of "stories woven around their principle tales, and are engagingly full of dialogues, dilemmas and alternative perspectives" (Sen A. , 2005, p. 3). Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black assert that the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are often studied together as Sanskrit epics and are "something of a national text" (Brodbeck & Black, 2007, p. 1). They go on to cite Apurba Kumar Sanyal as asserting in 2006 that both epics have been labelled as "the quintessence of everything that is India" (Brodbeck & Black,

2007, p. 1). The stories in the Mahabharata are played out all over India in various contexts and versions. R. K. Narayan´s assertion regarding the popularity of the Ramayana, quoted earlier on in this study, could easily be asserted as being true for the Mahabharata as well, (Green, 2001).

In reflection of our interest in the Mahabharata within the context of this study, I would like to quote Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, who eloquently expresses with the following words:

> Among the chief narrative legacies that modern India has inherited in the cultural-religious sphere is the ancient Sanskrit of the Mahabharata, with its many variations and revisions to the present day. It is the story of its heroine, Draupadi, and in particular the famous episode of her disrobing, that I subject here to feminist examination and reinterpretation. My interest lies primarily in discovering the resonance of this story in contemporary India and its implications for women. [...] to show how the 'uses of tradition' in postcolonial societies may be understood, drawing upon contemporary social practices [...] connected to the 2,500-year-old story of Draupadi´s sexual humiliation (Rajan, 2002, p. 39).

The main story of the Mahabharata revolves around the lives of the Pandava brothers, their polyandrous marriage to the goddess Draupadi, and the conflict for supremacy and the throne of Hastinapur, between the Pandava brothers and their cousins the Kauravas. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, award winning poet and author

of *The Palace of Ilusions,* a novel that recounts the story of the Mahabharata from the point of view of the goddess Draupadi, states in the author´s note at the beginning of the novel that

> At the core of the epic lies the fierce rivalry between [...] the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The lifelong struggle between the cousins for the throne of Hastinapur culminates in the bloody battle of Kurukshetra, in which most kings of that period participated and perished" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. xiii).

The goddess Draupadi was wife to all five Pandava brothers. For the purpose of this study, we shall focus exclusively on the story and character of Draupadi, as a means of further exploring and challenging gender roles, perceptions and culture within Indian society. Draupadi was the daughter of King Draupada. She was born from a sacrificial fire along with her twin brother, as a boon to the King who had requested for an invincible son who would destroy his enemy Drona. Thus King Draupada got not only his invincible son but also a stunningly beautiful, dark skinned daughter, (Narasimhan C. V., 1965). Sally Sutherland draws our attention to the fact that when Draupadi first makes her appearance in the epic following the contest for her marriage, there is very little emphasis given to the description of her character or personality, instead of which the focus is on her physical appearance at birth, as cited from the Mahabharata by Sutherland,

> Moreover, the princess from Pancala rose up from the middle of the sacrificial fire. She was beautiful and enchanting; she had a beautiful body and a waist the shape pf the sacrificial alter. She was dark, had eyes like lotus leaves, and dark, wavy hair. She was a goddess who had taken on a human form. Her scent, like that of a blue lotus, perfumed the air for the distance of a mile. She possessed the most beautiful figure; none was her equal on earth, (Sutherland, 1989, p. 64).

Sutherland also points out that The Mahabharata offers more details regarding the physical appearance of Draupadi than most of the other heroines of the epic. There is little detail about Sita´s physical appearance for example, other than the implication that her beauty bewitched the demon Ravana.

King Draupada holds a contest of strength for his daughter Draupadi's hand in marriage, in which she is won by Arjuna. See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 17. The marriage ceremony termed *svayamvara* is highly ironical; the word svayamvara means "self-choice" (Sutherland, 1989), however, neither Sita in the Ramayana nor Draupadi had any voice in deciding who they would be betrothed to. The case of Draupadi is even more paradoxical as she was won by Arjuna's feat of strength, but it was then decided by Kunti, the Pandava brothers´ mother, that she should be a wife to all five brothers. See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 18. At no moment in the epic is there any sign of Draupadi being consulted regarding her own wishes on the matter (Narayan, 1978).

(1.2.4) FIGURE - 17 A & B

A – *Vyasa Mahabharatam*, Halebidu, Karnataka, (12th century). [Soapstone]. Swayambar Hoysalaswara Temple, Arjun aims at a continuously revolving fish above his head, successfully hitting it by looking at its reflection in a tub of water. He thus wins the hand of princess Draupadi in marriage. © Venkat B.Rao. Retrieved from: https://chaayaaviidhi.wordpress.com/tag/beluru-halebidu/

B – The *Swayamvara of Panchala's princess, Draupadi*. Volume: 1 Publisher: [Gorakhpur Geeta Press] Language: Hindi. Author: Ramanarayanadatta Astri. Digitizing sponsor: University of Toronto. Acquired in 1965. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Swayamvara_of_Panchala%27s_princess,_Draupadi.jpg
https://archive.org/details/mahabharata01ramauoft/page/n607

(1.2.4) FIGURE - 18

The Mahabharata relief at Dashavatara Temple. Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, (early 6th century). The five Pandava brothers with Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* are depicted from left to right: Bhima, Arjuna, Yudisthira, Nakula, and Sahadeva with Draupadi on the far right.© Bob King
Retrieved from: https://www.ancient.eu/image/5424/pandavas/

Draupadi´s initial trial in the Mahabharata occurs when one of her husbands, *Yudhistira* gambles her away to *Duryodhana* in a game of dice. According to Narayan´s translated version of the Mahabharata, Draupadi´s public humiliation starts with her being ordered to the assembly hall where all the noble gamblers, and the on looking elders and guests are gathered, with the command, "Go, get that beloved wife of the Pandavas. Let her learn her duties as a sweeper of the chambers of noble men, and how to wait on their pleasure [...]. Go, bring her" (Narayan, 1978, p. 99). Excerpts from the text are as follows,

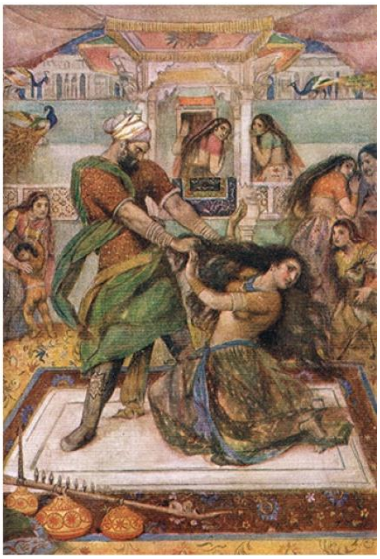
> ‘Go and bring her without a moment’s delay. She has no right to question and dawdle. She is a puppet for us to handle. Go and bring her here.’ [...] As he approached her, she shrank back saying, ‘I cannot come before any one today . . . I am in the woman’s month . . . I am clad in a single wrap . . . go away. . . ‘[...] Dussasana sprang on her, seized her by the hair, and dragged her along to the assembly hall. . . ‘I am in my monthly period . . . clad in a single piece. . .’ ‘Whether in your season or out of it, or clad in one piece or none, we don’t care. We have won you by fair means and you are our slave. . .’ [...] ‘a husband may have the absolute right to dispose of his wife in any manner he pleases, even if he has become a pauper and a slave . . .’ (Narayan, 1978, p. 100).

When Draupadi is brought against her will to the assembly hall before a large gathering of men, in her supposedly impure state, – “As he approached her, she shrank back saying “I cannot come before anyone today…I am in the woman´s month.”…I am clad in a single wrap… go away” (Narayan, 1978, p. 61); – as was the view towards menstruating women – her husbands were merely able to stand by and watch her humiliation. The climax of the scene is reached when Duryodhana’s brother Dussasana, grabs hold of a corner of Draupadi´s sari and violently attempts to strip her naked by yanking it off her. This is perhaps the most famous and tantalizing scene of the Mahabharata, which has been depicted in numerous calendar art works, text books, films and also the televised version of

the epic; the scene in which miraculously, it proves impossible to strip Draupadi of her sari, – according to the legend *Krishna*[33] replenishes her sari preventing it from coming to an end. Her sari cannot be unravelled; the more sari that is unwound from her body, the more sari reappears, while there is a growing heap of unending sari at her feet, until finally Dussasana is forced to give up, (Narayan, 1978). See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 19 and (1.2.4) FIGURE - 20.

In her analysis of the characters of Sita and Draupadi, Sally Sutherland highlights the differences in personalities and responses to adversity of the two heroines and persuades the reader to understand that this difference might be partly accountable for the popular reception and massive adoration of Sita as opposed to other Hindu goddesses, in this case Draupadi. While Sita remains submissive and unresisting to the ordeals to which she is subjected by Rama, finally committing suicide by asking to be swallowed up by the earth; Draupadi is bold, resisting and questioning of what her five husbands try to impose on her. She is defiant, argumentative and even aggressive, and in one episode, she actually goes so far as to physically punish one of her husbands, Bhimasena, for not protecting her. (Sutherland, 1989).

[33] The extremely popular, compassionate and revered god of love and mischief.



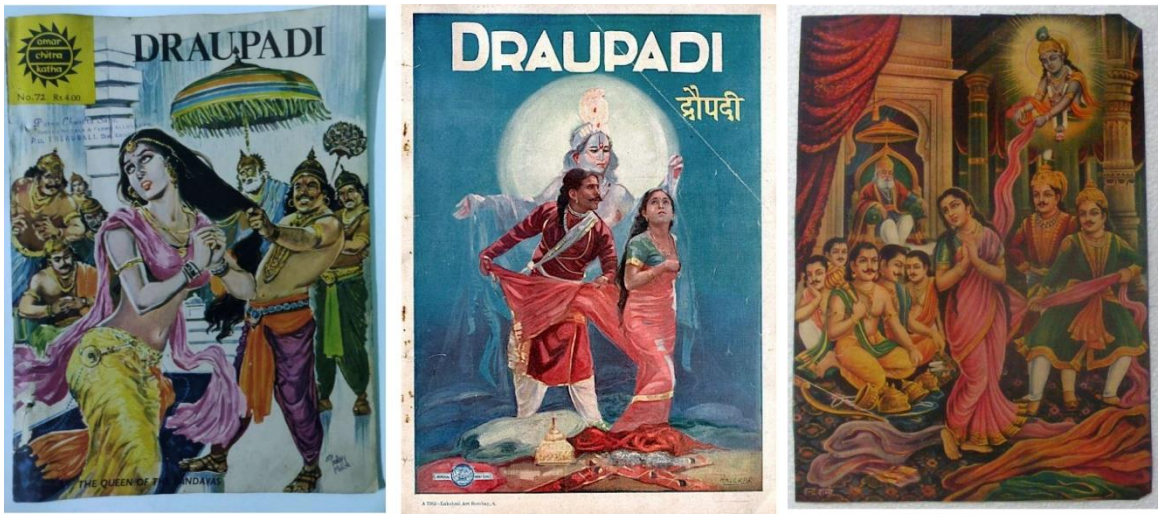
(1.2.4) FIGURE - 19 A & B

A – *Draupadi Humiliated*, Mahabharata. Basholi School, (18th century). [Watercolour]. Ancient History Encyclopedia. Retrieved from: https://www.ancient.eu/image/5520/draupadi-humiliated-mahabharata/[

B – Evelyn Paul, (1911). *Draupadi dragged from her chamber*. From: Monro, W. D Illustrations, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company. Retrieved from: https://archive.org/details/storiesofindiasg00monr/page/196 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Draupadi_dragged_from_her_chamber.jpg

‘This is monstrous,’ she cried. ‘Is morality gone? Or else how can you be looking on this atrocity? [...] I do not understand why they stand there transfixed, speechless and like imbeciles. . . .’ (Narayan, 1978, p. 101). ‘It seems to me that men can never survive in this world by merely practising tolerance. Excessive tolerance is responsible for the calamity that has befallen you and your brothers. In prosperity and adversity alike you cling to your ideals, fanatically. [...] It seems to me that you would sooner

abandon me and your brothers than abandon your principles (Narayan, 1978, p. 118).



(1.2.4) FIGURE - 20 A, B & C

A – *Draupadi*. Amar Chitra Katha publications, (comic, 1970-1980).
Retrieved from: https://comizone.com/index.php/product/rare-amar-chitra-katha-draupadi/

B – *Draupadi*, (1931 Hindi film poster). Directed by Bhagwati Prasad Mishra, produced by Ardeshir Irani, Starring Ermeline, Prithviraj Kapoor, Khalil & Jagdish Sethi. Imperial Film Company, 1931.
Retrieved from: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Draupadi_(1931_film)

C – *Draupadi Vastraharan*, (1940) [vintage print].
Retrieved from: https://www.oldindianarts.in/search?q=draupadi

Sutherland asserts that the behaviour and personality of Sita rather than Draupadi, is upheld as normal in Hindu society. Draupadi becomes aware from the beginning that her husbands will make no attempt to protect her and her humiliation turns into rage directed not only at her feeble husbands but also at the

on looking, supposedly learned nobles who permit what is her public humiliation. Sutherland interprets the scene as “being a humiliation for all the men present” (Sutherland, 1989, p. 67).

Sutherland also highlights the fact that the character of Draupadi is significantly more developed and matured than Ramayana´s Sita. Draupadi is not only strikingly beautiful, but intelligent, quick witted and sharp; she is highly apt at debate and it is her sharpness of thought and clear judgement that eventually save her husbands and later on her sons from slavery and misfortune. Draupadi is articulate, forceful and also vengeful and unforgiving of having been wronged; the years only serve to intensify her anger towards her husbands and those who caused her pain and unhappiness.

The story of Draupadi´s disrobing has been studied, interpreted and reinterpreted by scholars who have used the theme to articulate, analyse and explore their socio-political and cultural concerns to the point where “she has traversed the realms of the divine, the mortal and the mythic” (Verma, 2015, p. 56). Benu Verma asserts that due to the varied and diverse scrutiny of Draupadi by numerous academics, writers and poets, she has gone “beyond her mythic and literary renderings [...] to evoke a political agency for the mortal woman” (Verma, 2015, p. 56). As a heroine of the epic who was non-conforming, non-submissive and aggressive enough to have questioned her treatment, demanding retribution of those who wronged her, Draupadi was unique and as such raises moral, socio-political and cultural questions in colonial, post-colonial and contemporary

contexts. The scene of her disrobing and humiliation has been used to express multiple ideas and theories from the wrong doing to a nation, where Draupadi, as a woman represents the country, *mother India*, to the place and treatment of women in society, where she stands in representation of all women.

Radhika Coomaraswamy states that the disrobing of Draupadi for many Hindu women could be seen as one of their first encounters with gender violence, (Coomaraswamy, 2004). One could in fact go further and state that both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata offer the Indian population several encounters with which to raise questions regarding the abuse of rights and violence against women. Coomaraswamy asserts that the disrobing of Draupadi is significant in that it highlights the range of gender abuse and violence in India. Culturally, in most parts of South Asia, any part of a woman´s naked skin made visible in an inappropriate context would be akin to an act of severe sexual violence.

We must remember that Draupadi, while having her menstrual period, – and therefore deemed as impure and polluting – was dragged by her hair in front of a hall full of men and the failed attempt was made to strip her of her clothing. Not a single one of the men present, witnessing her humiliation and pain, showed any inclination of attempting to prevent what was happening. The men in the assembly were all supposed to be honourable kings and sons of gods, yet none made even the slightest move towards stopping what was clearly an act of abuse. It was Lord Krishna´s intervention from heaven which prevented the successful disrobing of Draupadi. (1.2.4) FIGURE - 20

Within this context, the act of disrobing a woman spells out the highest form of shame and humiliation; in a society that places utmost importance on the preservation of honour at all costs, while at the same time linking shame directly with the loss of honour, worthiness and dignity, (Coomaraswamy, 2004). Significantly, as mentioned earlier, women´s honour it would seem is also very closely linked with the honour and pride of the society to which the woman pertains. (Lothspeich, 2007); (Coomaraswamy, 2004).

According to Coomaraswamy, in a study carried out by Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, of riots during the partition of India,[34] it was clear that the population associated the honour of their community directly with the so called chastity and honour of their women. Accounts of the murder of women by their own family members "in order to save their sexual purity and maintain the honour of the community" (Abraham, 2007, p. 20), were not uncommon. Women are thus converted into objects, the property or possessions of their husbands and the nation, to be used at will while also posing a permanent risk of dishonour and shame for the family and country. "Women´s bodies not only belonged to their husbands but also to the nation", (Coomaraswamy, 2004, p. 59).

The study carried out by Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin recounts how after partition, the Indian and Pakistani state proceeded to search out and *"recover"*

[34] See: (Menon & Bhasin, Borders & Boundaries, 1998), "Borders and Boundaries, Women in India´s Partition," Rutgers University Press New Brunswick, New Jersey

abducted Hindu and Muslim women from Pakistan and India; with no regard whatsoever of the choices and desires of the women themselves. Ritu Menon and Kamala Basin quote a Member of Parliament stating that, "As descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive" (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 68). The women involved, in many instances, had by then built new homes and settled down with families that they were forced to leave behind, often even having to abandon new born babies. Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin assert that between 1947 and 1956, "a total of over 30,000 Muslim and non-Muslim women were forcefully *returned* to their *legitimate* homes by *The Central Recovery Operation of the Government of India"*, (Menon & Bhasin, 1993, p. 99).

Adding further to the catastrophic tragedy and injustice of this situation, was the fact that the returning women were generally not accepted back in their previous homes by husbands or parents, as their original families deemed them as impure and soiled. To make matters even direr, it was presumed that the honour of the nation as well as the community to which these women pertained depended on the state in which the women found themselves when they were returned. As a result, they spelled shame and dishonour for their families and in turn their societies; none had escaped the violence and abuse that abduction brought with it.

According to Taisha Abraham, the honour of the men who had been unable to protect their womenfolk had thus been shattered and the *state* had to be brought in to save the situation. Thus, in Urvashi Butalia's words, (as cited in Abraham, 2007), "the central patriarchy of the state re-enforced patriarchy within the

family" (Abraham, 2007, p. 21). In Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin's words, preserving the *sanctity* of the family, the community and the nation depended on "keeping the boundaries intact, in maintaining difference, and in refusing to allow sexuality to be contaminated by secularity" (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 124). Often, pregnant women were pushed into either aborting or abandoning their babies; and even when they managed to have them, these babies were forever regarded as illegitimate, social outcasts, and unacceptable, (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). The result of this horrific state misdemeanour and abuse was that the government was forced to build special homes where these women could live, albeit in seclusion from either of their families, (Coomaraswamy, 2004).

As stated by Taisha Abraham, "Today, one of the biggest challenges faced by women fighting against oppression in India, has been from the religious fundamentalists" (Abraham, 2007, p. 22). The increase in nationalism and extreme patriotic tendencies towards the beginning of the nineteenth century led to the glorification of the past as the "ideal classical age of Indian civilization" (Verma, 2015, p. 61). Independence from British rule was painted as a return to the "*golden age*" as per the tradition of Hinduism within the sacred texts. Geeta Kapur terms the process as "[...] how the desire for social emancipation may be expressed through cultural creation during and immediately after the struggle for national independence. And especially how the past, in the form of mythic material, comes to be handled in the process", (Kapur, 1987, p. 79).

Religious and cultural diversity were eclipsed in order to uphold a pan Indian identity which was propagated through diverse medias as well as the arts, poetry and literature. In Geeta Kapur's words,

> The notion of the past usually dovetails with the notion of the classical. Both derive from the quite obvious desire to retrieve at the imaginative level that golden age of Indian civilization when it is said to have been purest, most prosperous and supreme. The period of the epics to the puranas, and then Kalidasa, usually provides the time-frame as well as the wealth of legends that are to be glorified. (Ideologically speaking, the classical past is set against the medieval which is regarded as having been corrupted by a medley of foreign influences [...] The touchstone for nineteenth century Indian renaissance is thus Hindu civilization (Kapur, 1989, p. 68).

According to Partha Chatterjee, (as cited in Verma, 2015), during the period of pre-independence, changing the *status of women* became synonymous with bringing about the Indian renaissance. Women who became *"*symbolic of nation, were a popular object of discourse, their rights and restrictions being a common point of negotiation between the coloniser and the colonised.[...] a national identity was constructed through an image of the ideal Hindu woman" (Verma, 2015, p. 62). The ideal Hindu woman was defined by the image of women in the sacred texts and epics. As Tanika Sarkar defines it,

> A constant preoccupation as a whole was with the figure of the woman: she dominates [...] through the conceptualisation of the country itself in her image, or by investing the ideal patriot with her qualities or with the reconstruction of feminine roles and duties and consequently the familial universe, by the nationalist enterprise (Sarkar T. , 1987, p. 2011).

In this vein, the cultural personification of country or homeland into motherland, *Deshmata or Bharatmata* in nationalist discourse became a norm. Along this line of thought and discourse, the people or citizens of the country also became sons of the Mother. Women symbolized nation and their status became akin to the status of Indian society, creating an identity of nation directly linked with the image of the ideal Hindu woman, (Sarkar T. , 1987). See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21 and (1.2.4) FIGURE - 22. The idealization of what was considered to be the glorious past, before colonial rule, was propagated so as to overstate what was seen as the ruins of the present under foreign influence, usually represented as impure and contaminating.

The disrobing of Draupadi, in this context, was highlighted and dispersed as a metaphor for the state in which *Mother India,* in other words the nation, found *herself* humiliated and abused under corrupting foreign influences. Gandhi, – in his quest for a clear Indian identity, economic independence and sustainability for India, campaigned widely for the use of homespun cotton cloth in India, – became a metaphor for Krishna, who saved Draupadi with his endless supply of sari,

(Sarkar T. , 1987). Partha Chattergee highlights how, the nationalist movement, in their search for the new Indian glory, set women up with new identities to follow which would supposedly recast the old statuses and values. For that purpose the feminine became the pure, inner, spiritual part of the nation that nurtures and nourishes, (Chattergee, 1989).

Additionally, Tanika Sarkar points out that in the nationalist movement, women as figures of *Mother India,* apart from taking on active roles in the struggle for independence, were also idealized to their detriment; cast in the role of mothers who were willing, even obliged to suffer all manner of hardships and sacrifice for their metaphoric sons, in this case the country, (Sarkar T. , 1987). See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21.

Ritu Menon, Kamala Basin and Urvashi Butalia, as seen earlier, carried out pioneering studies into the state of women during the partition of India, which shed light on diverse considerations and offered possibilities as to why women and their so called chastity came to be so intricately linked with family and community honour, as well as the identity of the nation. As Taisha Abraham declares, their studies point to the discourses of patriarchy and religion creating a link which brought about the situation of women´s sexuality being directly representative of the nation. […] women´s bodies became the terrain on which notions of sexual purity (demanded by the patriarchal family/community) and religious identity (demanded by the nation-state to define its citizens–and this, despite, India´s claims to be secular–) were embattled, (Abraham, 2007, p. 21).

Draupadi and Sita´s stories, which recount the numerous difficulties, and abuse that they suffer and the countless sacrifices that they make for the men in their lives, fitted in perfectly with the creation of the role model that the Nationalist discourse sought to propagate. See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21 and (1.2.4) FIGURE - 22. As Benu Verma asserts, Draupadi's mythic story, with her fateful life full of hardships and sacrifices, made an excellent role model. More than just being a sad life, Draupadi's was a life lived for others, for the men around her. The feminine quality which she inspired was one, who never faltered in the face of atrocities, never left hope and most importantly never strayed from the domestic centrality.

(1.2.4) FIGURE - 21 A, B & C

A – *Mother India.* Poster for the 1957 Bollywood major blockbuster film, directed by Mehboob Khan, starring Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Raaj Kumar, Rajendra Kumar and Kanhaiyalal. This is a clear example of the role and iconography used for the reinvention of Indian women into the *infinitely willing, ever sacrificial, nationalist mother India martyr.* The film was not only a block buster, but has gone on to become a major classic that is still widely viewed around India. "[…] the film, reflecting the odds and aspirations of an emerging nation, went on to be the biggest grosser at the box office" (Salam, 2010, p. para. 2).
Retrieved from: https://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/Mother-India-1957/article16836460.ece

B – *The Death of Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, (n.d.), [Watercolour]. A modern portrayal of *Mother India* or *Bharat Mata* grieving Gandhi's death.
Retrieved from:
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/congress/bharatmata/bharatmata.html

C –*Hind Devi*, (1920-1930), [print].
Retrieved from:
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/congress/bharatmata/bharatmata.html

(1.2.4) FIGURE - 22 A & B

A – *Bharat Mata*. A poster from the 1970s, with figures of different ethnicities, but no Muslims.
Retrieved from:
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/congress/bharatmata/bharatmata.html

B – Another poster of *Mother India* wearing a necklace of the heads of prominent figures of the nationalist movement with Mohandas Gandhi in the centre, representative of her devoted sons.
Retrieved from:
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/congress/bharatmata/bharatmata.html

She represented for the Indian women, the domestic core which they had to constitute and execute perfectly, thus inspiring the men folk to protect this core from the contamination of the British rule. As the archetypal anima in

> the colonial setting, Draupadi represented the ideal Indian woman, who, not only inspires the Indian men with her patient, benevolent albeit vulnerable femininity, but also assumes leadership for spreading the message for the ideal feminine and masculine for the nationalist times (Verma, 2015, p. 63).

As such, the disrobing of Draupadi has been interpreted by numerous scholars to represent the attempt to degrade and taint the country, i.e. "Mother India" (Lothspeich, 2007), (Sarkar T. , 1987), (Verma, 2015). "Similarly, the saviour of Draupadi, has been cast as a as a macho masculine figure, who in order to protect the honour of 'Mother India' had to be courageous, bold, strong, clever and very passionate" (Verma, 2015, p. 65). According to Lothspeich, the nationalist discourse draws a clear parallel between the Pandava brothers´ war to avenge the dishonour of Draupadi while also recovering the kingdom of Hastinapur, and the movement for independence from colonial rule, or in other words, the British Raj, (Lothspeich, 2007).

A completely different take on Draupadi is offered by some modern scholars such as social activist and writer Mahasweta Devi and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In *Breast Stories*,[35] Mahasweta Devi focuses on the character of Draupadi from the Mahabahrata, who was subjected to diverse sexual and likewise

[35] See: (Devi & Spivak, 1997)

https://feminisminindia.com/2019/02/08/draupadi-review-mahasweta-devi/

atrocities and transfers her into our modern times. She reinterprets the epic without any frills by casting the story into the realism of India today and relates the survival and victory of the modern Draupadi. Mahasweta Devi´s Draupadi turns the tables on her abusers, shaming them singlehandedly, without divine or any other form of intervention. Her mangled body becomes her weapon. She uses her own body, which bears evidence of the abuse to which she has been subjected, to shame the perpetrators and denounce the violence and inhumanity of her reality (Devi & Spivak, 1997). Mahasweta Devi´s Draupadi represents to a large extent the current situation of lower cast and tribal women both in the cities and rural areas of India.[36]

According to Monica Dhillon, "A major element in the postcolonial agenda is not only to disestablish the master narratives of art, nation, enlightenment and patriarchy but also to emancipate the 'have nots' and 'the subalterns' within the newly independent nation state" (Dhillon, 2013, p. 72). Dhillon goes on to cite Elleke Boehmer as stating that Post colonialism as a theory aims at putting into action political strategies, theories, texts and activism that bring about some sort of social justice by highlighting and questioning inherent inequalities in the system, (Dhillon, 2013).

[36] See: http://oneindiaonepeople.com/the-drama-of-mahasweta-devi/

Monica Dhillon also states that the usage of the prefix ‘post’ in the context of colonial discourse translates not only to the chronological order of the happening of events in history, but also into a metaphor for change. The postcolonial refers to the attempt and intention to rewrite history from alternative viewpoints, from angles that are inclusive of traditionally subaltern and marginalized sectors of society; while consequently raising questions regarding the power play and politics of the autocratic narratives of patriarchy and nationalism.

In this context, Mahasweta Devi´s stories condemn the nation which does not cater for the needs of the downtrodden segments of society, while having made use of them in both the pre and post-independence struggle. “Her writings become sites of resistance, participation and collective action”, (Dhillon, 2013, p. 72). As Dhillon asserts, Mahasweta Devi rewrites the narrative of Draupadi´s fate, appropriating her with the strength and will to rise up against her exploiters, thus achieving empowerment through the questioning of social and political systems that are inherently unjust and abusive of the more vulnerable. Devi is quoted (as cited in Dhillon, 2013) as stating,

> The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger… I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of India which is projected by

the government, to expose its naked brutality (Devi, 1998, p. ix-x), (Dhillon, 2013, p. 73).

Devi, as a voracious activist and writer, biting in her critique and appraisal uses her searing narratives to bring to light the fact that in India basic rights and representation of the underprivileged exist only in the books of law. However, it would seem that no intent is made to actually enforce these laws. Flavia Agnes, a legal activist, (as cited in Abraham, 2007), asserts that irrespective of the fact that campaigns by activists have usually led to changes in the laws covering violence against women, the reality in terms of implementation of the laws is that, "the condition of women was still where it was before these laws had been amended." (Abraham, 2007, p. 28). What urgently needs to be addressed and challenged is the continuing dominant patriarchal framework within which laws are still created, amended and enforced.

Flavia Agnes as (cited in Abrahams, 2007), presents the case of the amendment of the laws for rape in 1983. She highlights the 10 year minimum rigorous imprisonment law, which was decreed to cover cases of rape in custody, gang rape, or rape involving pregnant women and girls less than twelve years of age. In this case, Agnes underscores the case of a seven year old *Harijan* – traditionally considered as untouchable – girl who was raped by an eighteen year old man from Rajasthan. The sentence was reduced to 5 years by the Rajasthani High Court, and on questioning was justified with the following, "Although the

rape warrants a more severe sentence, considering that the accused was only 18 years of age, it would not be in the interest of justice to enhance the sentence of five years imposed by the trial court" (Abraham, 2007, p. 28). What is obvious in this case is that the court is clearly subjective, biased towards the male rapist, and unimpressed by the female child victim.

Taisha Abrahams draws attention to another extremely infamous case, which highlights the inherent patriarchal, cast and class bias which is pervasive in interpreting the law in India. This particular case known as the *Sathin Bhanwari* case involved a lower cast village worker, Bhanwari Devi, who in 1985 became a prominent activist, in the government run Women´s development programme. She was involved in matters of land disputes, minimum wages, water distribution, education and health, (Mathur, 1992).

In 1992 she became actively involved in the anti-child marriage campaign and found herself increasingly alienated from her fellow villagers, local elders and village heads, who out rightly disapproved and rejected her stand point on the matter of child marriages. Consequently, both Bhanwari Devi and her family began to face undisguised hostility and aggressions from fellow villagers. This ultimately led to her losing her job and the family being socially and economically ostracised, not being supplied by daily essentials such as milk, and not being able to continue with their small family business. The events culminated eventually in physical aggressions and bodily harm.

On 22 September 1992, Bhanwari Devi and her husband were attacked by a group of five men who battered him unconscious and gang raped her. Posterior documentation on how the case was handled by the police, and even the medical professionals responsible for collecting invaluable evidence and filing the relevant reports, ooze with the horrors of cast, class and sex biases; patriarchal indifference, callousness, institutional bias, misconduct and the corruption which so many victims of rape have to deal with in the Indian context, (Goonesekere, 2004), (Abraham, 2007), (Mathur, 1992). The ruling on this case, (as cited in Abraham, 2007) by the District and Sessions Judge in Jaipur was:

> Rape is usually committed by teenagers. The alleged rapists here are middle aged and therefore respectable citizens. Since the offenders were upper-caste men and included a Brahmin, the rape could not have taken place because Bhanwari was from a lower cast (Abraham, 2007, p. 29).

Mahasweta Devi´s Draupadi – or *Dopdi* as the name is also pronounced and as Mahasweta calls her character – and Bhanwari Devi could in fact be one and the same person. As Monika Dhillon puts it, "It is Dopdi who goes in to the village in search of food [...]. And to spy on the activities of the police. She is a strong, resilient female character, transgressing the gender and cultural norms of her society," (Dhillon, 2013, p. 75).

Monika Dhillon asserts that the modern Draupadi could be seen as the "true face of feminist assertion in modern India" (Dhillon, 2013, p. 76). Bhanwari Devi

and the numerous women, who prove to be resilient and resistant, rebelling against the oppressive systems that attempt to strip and abuse of them, are clearly portrayed and represented in Mahasweta Devi´s short stories. These are women who are capable of using their tortured bodies and souls as weapons against the instigators and systems of their abuse.

Towards the last stage of "Dopdi", Monika Dhillon draws our attention to the fact that Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi has a clear likening to the goddess Kali. D. Karunanayake (as cited in Dhillon, 2013) states that the depiction of Dopdi as Kali is not accidental. Kali, as the goddess of bloodshed and death and also the empowered feminine; the enraged, fierce and terrifying incarnation of the goddess Durga, dark skinned and semi naked, she is specifically known for her power to destroy evil forces and is traditionally adored by the subaltern and lower cast people. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi transforms her situation from the abused and violated woman into the fierce, independent Kali (as cited in Dhillon, 2013),

> Her black body comes even closer. Dopdi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Dopdi wipes her blood on her palm and issues a challenge [...]. "I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? [...]." [...] and for the first time he is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Dhillon, 2013, p. 76).

The traditional mythic Draupadi does not in any way bear resemblance to the modern Dopdi. Draupadi in the Mahabharata, although a strong woman who resisted and contested the instigators of her humiliation and abuse, notwithstanding, called upon her husbands in order to avenge her pain. Thus, it can be understood that to a large extent she relies on what could be interpreted as the patriarchal model. Dopdi, however, confronts her abusers independently using her own tactics; she is the "unarmed target" (Dhillon, 2013, p. 76), her weapon is her body, purporting the evidence of the perversion to which she has been subjected. Dhillon sums up Devi´s characterising and narrative of Dopdi as applied in the contemporary context and reality with the following words:

> Devi´s short story [...] proves to be the true face of feminist assertion in India. Dopdi is a rebel, hunted down by the government in its attempt to subjugate the revolutionary groups. [...] such stories impart political activism at grass root levels. [...] Movements like slut walk provide political activism to such literary writings as literature is an act of imagination and when it becomes committed to social transformation it becomes an act of survival (Dhillon, 2013, p. 76).

As an illustration of the Dopdi model of dissent, Dhillon alludes to the naked protest carried out by women in Bamon Kampu, Imphal East District, in the north eastern state of Manipur, on July 15th 2004. Twelve women, *Mothers of Manorama* protested naked in front of the Western gate of the Kangala Fort, – the

Indian Army headquarters and a symbol of state power – brandishing placards which read, *Indian Army rape us* (Sen & Bagriya, 2013, p. para. 1), (Chakravarti, 2010, p. 49).[37] See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 23. The women rose up to denounce the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama, while she was in the custody of Assam soldiers. The protesting women asserted that this and other brazen incidents of abuse of power allegedly occur as a result of the *Armed Forces Special Power Act, Section 4*, which permits the army to shoot with an aim to kill in public spaces.

Sen and Bagriya declare that at the time of the writing of their article in January 2013, despite the fact that District Judge C. Upendra Singh who was in charge of the case had put the blame squarely on the security forces, as well as the presence of more than ample evidence of rape and murder, – semen and blood, as well as an inordinate number of bullet wounds all over the victim's body, including the genital area, "The Upendra Report on Manorama's killing remains sealed. [...] In the past 10 years, 20 instances of rape and sexual assault by security forces have been reported, but there has not been a single conviction*"* (Sen & Bagriya, 2013, pp. para. 3-5).[38]

[37] For details on this case see also: "These Fellows Must Be Eliminated" Relentless Violence and Impunity in Manipur (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

[38] See also: Amnesty International Document – India Briefing on the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. (Human Rights Committee, 2005).

(continuación de la nota al pie)

(1.2.4) FIGURE - 23

The women brandished placards with different slogans such as *Indian Army Take Our Flesh, Indian Army Rape Us, Indian Army lies.*
Retrieved from: https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/indian-army-rape-us/296634 https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/right-to-rape/cid/293225

In order to speculate about the reasoning behind the facts of the above situation, an analysis by Rajeswari Sundan Rajan, in referring to the story of Draupadi in the Mahabharata, might help to reveal some of the psychology that is at play. Rajan states that in the Mahabharata, and specifically in the story of Draupadi, we have "a text that serves as resource for operating relations power" (Rajan, 2002, p. 39). According to Rajan, this is clear even by simply bearing in mind the amount of "adaptations, commentaries, revisions, dramatizations and retellings it has undergone in Indian cultural history (Rajan, 2002, p. 39). Rajan

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http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA20/025/2005/en/41fc59d2-d4e1-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/asa200252005en.html

points out that in the contemporary context the figure of Draupadi is appropriated to fulfil polarizing ideological standpoints; on the one hand, the sanctioning and legalization of patriarchal control of women, and on the other hand, the interpretation of Draupadi "as a proto-feminist cultural heroine," (Rajan, 2002, p. 40).

The person of Draupadi, in addition, points a finger to the question of, caste and class; according to Janaky, (as cited in Rajan, 2002),

> Draupadi brings up the class and caste aspects of sexual oppression [...] Draupadi can be recuperated for feminism not by essentializing her predicament as a 'woman´s issue,' but by remaining alert to the 'sexual vulnerability and political subordination of women within the larger network of intersections of power and ideology at the multiple levels of caste, race and class (Rajan, 2002, p. 44).

Although it might be argued that the questions of gender equality, women´s rights and empowerment in India are crucial issues which are at the forefront of intellectual discourse and continue to be addressed vigorously as part of modernization and 21st century challenges; on careful scrutiny, one can infer that within conventional culture and attitudes in both post-colonial and contemporary India, there were and still are widely, even pathologically discordant positions towards gender and modernity. Ascribing modernity as encroaching on *traditional values*, despite the fact that many of the traditional values that are upheld have no

place for gender equality, or empowerment of any sort, is much too often an uncomfortably common perception,[39] (Chatterjee, 1989). To quote from an essay by Debashi Prasad Nath and Juri Dutta:

> In the Indian situation, culture is often proposed as the antithesis of modernity. Culture, as understood in India, has grown out of the civilizational notion of India. [...] issues relating to culture constitute an integral part of the formation of a national(ist) modernity in India. Culture, in the Indian sense is a close cousin of tradition. And in this sense, cultural traditionalists have tried to evoke an image of Indian culture that is frozen in time and space; they suggest the image of an Indian culture that is 'untainted' by 'outside' influence. [...] the burden of protecting and preserving the 'true' and 'original' culture of the country rests on its women. [...] feminism and nationalism in the non-West share a close relationship. In the non-West, the 'culture question' becomes a 'national culture question' with serious consequences for women. [...] In the same line, a standard criticism of feminism across India derives from the charge that it is disconnected/ alienated from 'our culture'. The implicit accusation seems to be that feminist demands are modern demands, and that modernism means the erasure or giving up of Indian culture, and the

[39] Read: (Joseph, 2007), Editor: Barbuddhe, Indian Literature In English: Critical Views, Sarup & Sons, New Delhi.

> adaptation of Western values and ways of life. There is almost a paranoid fear in many sections of Indian and other South Asian societies regarding the 'modernisation' of women, as they are seen to be the bearers of culture (Nath & Dutta, 2012, p. 12).

In an article, very appropriately titled *"Why Kali Won't Rage: A Critique of Indian Feminism"* Rita Banerji draws our attention to some fundamental loop holes in attitudes and perceptions of culture, liberty and critical reflection within the recognition of realities that largely plague the Indian society. Issues significantly impeding advancement in the state of gender concerns. Banerji points out that unlike feminism in the west, Indian feminism often chooses to consciously turn a blind eye, stoically denying the presence of "deep-rooted, tradition-fed, gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men" (Banerji, 2012, p. para.1). As a result, the lasting and deploring state of women in India after over 150 years of feminism,[40] is not recognised or attributed as being in anyway the fault of deeply entrenched and long lasting patriarchal oppression.

Rita Banerjee demonstrates the above predicament by citing the opinions of various major Indian scholars and activists, involved in issues of education, cast and gender; as they appear in the book, *Feminism in India,* edited by Maitrayee

[40] See: (Chattergee, 1989, pp. 204-208, 233-252)

Chaudhri, and reviewed by Suma Chitnis (as cited in Banerji, 2012), as including "some of the most influential writings on the concept of feminism in India" (Banerji, 2012, p. para. 2). According to the writings of the above compilation, it would appear that Indian feminists, unlike their western counterparts, do not feel wronged or angered by either the patriarchies of their country or the dominant male autocrat. The reason for this misapprehension, on examining the texts, clearly points to historically and culturally rooted prejudices in favour of tradition, albeit traditions that could be argued as clearly disfavouring the empowerment or even enhancement of women.

On debating the issue of feminism, (as cited in Banerji, 2012) scholars like Suma Chitnis, for example, assert that women issues in India are not considered as being the same as those in the West and that India is traditionally a society that requires the maintenance of hierarchies, through customs and social codes of conduct. Chitnis defends her standpoint by claiming that "unlike the west where individuality and personal freedom are emphasized, Indians cherish values like submission to superiors, "self-denial" and "sublimating the [individual] ego" (Banerji, 2012, p. para. 3). As such, we can interpret that Suma Chitnis – former vice chancellor of the SNDT Women´s University in Bombay and former executive director of the J. N. Tata Endowment for the Education of Indians[41] –

[41] See: School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Studies; Mumbai, India. http://tisstory.tiss.edu/images/tisstory/doc/prof-suma-chitnis.pdf

does not concur with western feminists' anger with the patriarchies in their countries. In fact, Chitnis actually considers that there is nothing amiss with the concept that the Indian society is (as cited in Banerji, 2012) "sociologically and psychologically acclimatized to the notion of stratified social order, [...] what westerners may read as a forfeiting of the individual self is regarded by the Indian women as a prioritizing of family and community over the individual" (Banerji, 2012, p. para. 3).

Chitnis goes on to further validate this particular, unarguably warped perception of egalitarianism, asserting that the Indian constitution "granted women political status fully equal to that of men. [Sic] [And] thus Indian women did not have to bear the kind of injustices that women in the West had to suffer", (Banerji, 2012, p. para. 3). Chitnis asserts that should countries be evaluated according to their laws providing for the wellbeing of women, "India is likely to emerge as one of the most progressive countries" (Banerji, 2012, p. para. 3). She goes so far as to state that the legal policies and equal opportunities bills that western feminists are addressing, (as cited in Banerji, 2012), are already available to Indian women.

Madhu Kishwar, founder of *Manushi,* – a journal on women, society and politics, – in the same essay endorses Chitnis point of view, while also declaring that historically, in terms of women's rights and dignity, the assertiveness of women as individuals happened much earlier in India than in the west, (as cited in Banerji, 2012). One would be extremely hard put not to question both Suma

Chitnis and Madhu Kishwar, to ask that they clarify and elaborate about why and what, in their opinion and analysis is specifically not functioning in the Indian context; especially when taking into account international census figures regarding the domestic and professional status as well as emancipation of women in India, which have been presented earlier in this study and to which more data shall be added and detailed shortly. Kishwar professes that the culture of goddess worship makes Indian societies more mindful and accepting of women´s strength than in the west and that proof of this can be seen in the fact that Indian men are socially accepting of women in power and that feminist movements during the colonial era boasted of men leaders in the movement to abolish the practice of *sati* [42] and enact widow remarriage. (Banerji, 2012, p. para. 5).

Banerji calls into question these extremely obtuse opinions and arguments by highlighting that despite the supposed law and constitutional reforms or the presence of male feminists and a rich culture of goddess worship, while India has bounded ahead in giant leaps industrially, technologically and in wealth acquisition – to the point where (as cited in Banerji, 2012), it is in the process of becoming the third largest economy in the world, (Sinha, 2010, as cited in Banerji, 2012), – the ongoing condition of women in India, as representing 50% of the nation, is unarguably at the opposite end of the spectrum.

[42] The practice of widow (self) immolation on the husband´s funeral pyre

In the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report, compiled by the World Economic Forum, India ranked at 114 out of the 142 countries listed, (World Economic Forum, 2014, p. Rankings). According to the report, the advancement of countries is tracked using standardized evaluations of gender inequality based on criteria that include analysis of economic, political, educational and health factors. The regional analysis report on Asia and the Pacific had the following damning statement to make regarding India: "India slumps to 114th, making it the lowest-ranked BRICS[43] nation and one of the few countries where female labour force participation is shrinking" (2014, pp. Press Releases, Regional Analysis, para. 2).

I would like to finalize this examination of the mythological figure of Draupadi, and her various sister figures by contextualizing the protest carried out by the 'Mothers of Manorama,' already mentioned earlier, which took place in the relatively recent past and was arguably modelled principally on the figure of Dopdi by Mahasweta Devi. The story of Mahasweta Devi´s Draupadi is set in the period of 1971, when the Indian government sent out armed forces to crush with "exceptional severity" (Spivak, 1981, p. 386), the rebellious components of the rural, Naxalite population, to which Draupadi belonged. According to Marcus Franda, (as cited in Spivak, 1981), the Northern part of west Bengal, denominated the Naxalbari area, had witnessed the presence of peasant movements and

[43] Acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, which are considered to be the largest and fastest growing economies, having major regional and global impact

rebellion, mostly led by indigenous agrarian workers and tribal cultivators, who had risen up against the oppression of landless workers by landowners, a situation which was sustained by extra official government complicity policies.

Draupadi Mejhen, a tribal woman was on a list of wanted people. When she was captured by the authorities, she was stripped of her clothes, gang raped and violently assaulted; but unlike the mythical Draupadi of the Mahabharata, she had no saviour to come to protect her. Towards the final scene of Devi´s short story, she who was the victim, as has been recounted earlier in this study, turns round, refusing to cower or be beaten. In confronting her abusers with her nakedness, she forces them to face the evidence of the violence of their acts, which is categorically not what they want or had expected from the *helpless female victim*.

As a tribal woman or *Adivasi*, – a term referring to the original settlers of India, (Gandhi, 1968, p. 536), – Mahasweta Devi´s Dopdi in insisting on maintaining herself naked after the attackers finish with the ravaging of her body, and demonstrating no shame in the condition of her nakedness, effectively refuses to accept the role of the victim which is expected of her, thus disrupting and reversing the normal power politics of masculine state and feminine victim.

> Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. [...]. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? [...]

> Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Spivak, 1981, p. 402).

It would seem clear that Senanayak, as government representative and state authority, is a true reflection of the reality of the gendered characteristics of official power in India and the autocratic governing of certain regions and groups of people. Mahasweta Devi, in her short story sheds light on the patriarchal status of military and state authorities through the use of metaphors such as "power also explodes out of the male organ of a gun" (Spivak, 1981, p. 393).

Thangjam Manorama's story could arguably be the real life replica of Mahasweta Devi´s Draupadi; however, Manorama did not survive her battle. She was arrested on 11th of July 2004, aged 32, by soldiers of the Assam Rifles Army and killed after being violently tortured and raped; "her bullet ridden corpse was left in a field […]" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 25). Her body bore evidence of the horrifying cruelty and inhumanity of her captors. The incident led to massive protests which spread rapidly all over the country, but only after the widely publicised protest, (Khan, 2010), by 12 elderly women who stripped naked brandishing banners and shouting "Indian Army Rape Us, Indian Army eat our flesh" (Sen & Bagriya, 2013), (Chakravarti, 2010, p. 49). See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 23

Paromita Chakravarti, – in an article which focuses on the naked protest against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, after the rape and killing of Thangjam Manorama Devi, – states that, "Its quiet aggression exposed the naked predatoriness of the Indian state against its own female citizens" (Chakravarti, 2010, p. 47). Along the same lines of thought, Deepti Misri asserts that "[...] renders the state as a gendered institution that bestows on its male, upper-caste representatives a prosthetic masculinity that stems from official power" (Misri, 2011, p. 607).

Thus, we can affirm that both Devi´s Draupadi or Dopdi and the *Mothers of Manorama*, – as the participating women came to be known, – exposed the brutal repressive characteristics of the patriarchal authorities. They pushed the crude, horrendous reality of their acts into the open, where they could be massively witnessed, to be beheld by each and every individual, in all the horror, shame and violence involved. "(...) women rejected the patriarchal construction of rape as dishonouring women and redefined the boundaries of the public, and private, the personal and the political" (Chakravarti, 2010, p. 48). In this way, the figure of Draupadi, and particularly within the context portrayed in Mahasweta Devi´s story, may be interpreted as providing the model of protest and dissent which inspired the Mothers of Manorama amongst others. "Mahasweta's story represents a feminist literary appropriation of the Mahabharata toward an excoriating critique of the Indian state", (Misri, 2011, p. 609).

1.2.5. SCHOLARLY OBSERVATIONS ON GODDESSES

In Hindu mythology, goddess or Devi as we have seen, manifests in a vast variety of forms and although each goddess has specific traits and characteristics, they can also be connected to each other, they are all ancient while also being tangibly modern and contemporary. Despite the fact that the mythology surrounding many of the goddesses might be seen as encouraging or even worsening a reality that is detrimental to women; for their worshippers, it is also clearly evident that these goddesses are poised on a divine pedestal, by the fact of their grace, virtue, resolution and infinite strength; as they offer immeasurable solace and support in moments of extreme hardship and trial. Their resistance and tenacity in the face of often severe adversity provides worshippers with models to identify with and emulate while simultaneously drawing comfort and hope in moments of difficulty.

Additionally, even though many of the goddesses are mainly identified alongside their male deities, they are nonetheless admirable and strong in their resolve and steadfastness in surpassing the trials and suffering that they encounter; and in their capacity to remain stalwart and constant at all times. Looking at them, we can see that they are powerful anchors of courage and strength; their worship provides thousands of Hindu women trapped in troubled and conflictive realities the outlet with which to manage their circumstances.

According to Kapila Vatsyayan, an important amount of fascination, scholarly interest, interpretation and critical discourse has been generated by the *enigmatic goddesses.* Academics as varied as philosophers, art-historians, artists, social scientists and gender study specialists continue to delve in the subject, each offering new insights from their own context and point of view. To highlight an angle that is of interest to this study, Kapila Vatsyayan states that during her research into the images, myths and models of Indian goddesses, Madhu Bazaz Wangu "addresses the knotty problematic issue of the exalted and empowered Goddess, and the dominated and subjugated women" (Wangu, 2003, p. 8).

David Kinsley puts forward the case that following the example of societies of the west, where male dominated religions have traditionally translated into patriarchal societies; one might deceptively be lead into believing, as logic would dictate, that in societies where goddesses have a prominent role, women in turn enjoy a high status or dominate. "It is often assumed that goddesses, especially powerful and independent ones, affirm and promote female power and creativity and that this affirmation must have positive consequences in the social realm" (Kinsley, 1989, p. xii). However, as Kinsley points out, although the reverence of supreme and powerful goddesses does translate into positive symbolism for women in these societies; the relationship between goddess worship in mythology and religions and the status of women within these societies is a very slippery question. As Kinsley states,

> [...] almost all historical cultures that we know about, and most non-literate traditional cultures studied by anthropologists, tend to be male dominated to some extent. It is very difficult to find examples of goddesses who belong to societies in which there is egalitarianism between the sexes or in which males are subordinate to women (Kinsley, 1989, p. xii).

On the other hand, (as cited in Kinsley, 1989) there does seem to be increasing archaeological evidence of an old theory, wagered on the existence of non-patriarchal societies, where goddesses and female religious experiences dominated. New archaeological evidence combined with studies of myths and legends from classical culture seem to offer clear indications of the existence of civilizations from the prehistoric period, where the worship of goddesses predominated and women commanded central and leadership positions within the society, (Bachofen & Manheim, 1967); (Stone, 1976). "While evidence of male deities exists, the sheer number of female figurines and symbols seems to imply the centrality of female deities", (Kinsley, 1989, p. xiv).

Based on such evidence, a number of scholars do suggest that in fact goddess centred societies in which women dominated worship and religious rituals as well as rule and governance had provided societies which were largely egalitarian and lacking in signs or evidence of any of the suppression or subordination that are to be found in many contemporary societies across the globe (Stone, 1976). Kinsley, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that

however seducing the idea of goddess centred cultures translating into an elevated status for women may be, even considering the increasing evidence affirming to the existence in history of such societies, the interpretation that religious societies with goddess centred worship and reverence naturally translates into an elevated status of women in that society is highly debatable to say the least; bearing in mind the evidence and existing realities in contemporary societies such as in India.

> Hinduism knows a great variety of goddesses, many of whom are powerful and independent, some of whom dominate male deities, yet Hindu culture is patriarchal. Hinduism seems to teach that a theology/religion/mythology in which goddesses are important does not necessarily imply sexual egalitarianism. Female power, creativity, and authority in the theological sphere do not necessarily imply high female status in the social sphere. Indeed, sometimes the same text can contain an elevated goddess theology, on the one hand, and a low estimate of women's status on the other. The author of the *Devi-bhāgavata-purāṇa*, for example, a text that praises the "Great Goddess" above all other deities, despises women (Kinsley, 1989, p. xvii).

In her study of female gurus in Hinduism, (Charpentier, 2010), Marie-Thérèse Charpentier draws attention to Madhu Kishwar's observation of the difficulty entailed in accommodating contradictions such as the worship of Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, in a society where literacy rate for girls is only

54%, falling even further to 33% in the Northern states of the country, (Unicef.org, n.d). The inconsistency of a society that places such reverence on Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, while being home to an enormous proportion of women living in abject poverty, completely dependent on their husbands and family financially and otherwise; or the fact that in many communities, women are restricted to their homes requiring male *protection,* while the goddess is praised for her Shakti. Charpentier also quotes Ursula King as stating that,

> One must clearly distinguish between the place given to women in the world of religious imagination and that accorded to them in the actual world of religious life. These two often stand in an inverse relationship to each other and remain poles apart, (Charpentier, 2010, p. 253).

Charpentier further goes on to quote Madhu Kishwar once more, in a study of female saints, as declaring that,

> Just as the social acceptance of the women 'bhaktas' did not result in expanding options for ordinary women, so also the easy acceptance of outstanding women in unusual roles today does not indicate our society's willingness to grant ordinary women their basic human rights (Charpentier, 2010, p. 254).

Bearing in mind the views of scholars in the field, The World Economic Forum and Human Rights watch figures, amongst others; as well as what might be

observed even on the briefest of visits to India, it would be safe to assert that the perception and prolific worship of women as divine beings in society does not in any way translate into women empowerment in the material world. Although there are innumerable examples of women in India reaching positions of authority in social, political academic and even religious disciplines; the day to day reality of the average women in India is far from ideal, egalitarian or empowering.

PART 2 FEMINISM AND SOCIETY IN INDIA, DEVELOPMENT AND HISTORY

> […] for under the soft, loving, pliable girl there lay hidden, as much unknown to herself as to her surroundings, a woman of strong dominant will, strength that panted for expression and rebelled against restraint, fiery and passionate emotions that were seething under compression
>
> – […] a most undesirable partner to sit in the lady's arm-chair on the domestic rug before the fire.
>
> Annie Bessant, (as cited in Mackay, 2001, p. 122)

2.1 –SOCIAL REFORM FEMINISM

If we attempt to mark the specific moments and developments in feminism and women's movements in India it would have to start with the 19th century social reform movements that first articulated the women's question creating a platform for voices and writings on the subject. This was followed by the emergence of women's groups and women's participation in the nationalist cause in the early twentieth century leading on to post-independence "state domestication of the woman's question" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 17). The 1970s and 80 were marked by a resurgence of movements with a marked change in paradigm

from the 1990s onwards. It is a well-known fact that the 1930s spelt a particularly unique time in what may be categorised as contemporary or recent Indian history. The struggle for independence gave rise to opportunities for women who would normally not have been visible in the public arena, to come out and participate in the "freedom struggle" (Dalmia, 2006, p. 152). The period corresponded to the first generation of women who had real access to a systematic system of education, thus offering them the possibility of becoming professionals in a field of their choice. Notwithstanding of course the reality that many women, once married, were unable to put their education or skills to professional use outside the domestic sphere; expected as they were to dedicate themselves exclusively to their homes and families. The diverse movements for independence did however offer more women than previously, the opportunity to step out of the domestic sphere. Amongst these movements, the *Civil Disobedience* and *Quit India* movements stand out in particular.

However, prior to the 1930s and as early as the 1800s there were already certain individual scholars and leaders fighting against injustices concerning women within different social contexts. Many of these initial movements involved Colonial officials, educated Hindu and Muslim Indians, and upper-class women (Armstrong, 2017). These initial examples of activism, led to the early 1900s witnessing the presence of numerous individual women who became extremely active and visible; pioneering through the formation of a number of women's organizations the fundamental initiatives that laid the groundwork for future

movements. Amongst these we can name as examples the *Bharat Stri Mandal* in Calcutta, and the *Women's India Association* set up in 1917 (Chatterjee M. , 2001). Sarala Devi Ghoshal, Kumari Kumudini Mitra, Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Saminathan, Mrs. Dadabhoy, Mrs Ambujammal, Sarojini Naidu and Begum Ammam Bibi were some of the pioneering women who were involved in the setting up of these initial movements and organisations that laid the foundations for an increasingly active feminist discourse within the context of the national movement.

Annie Besant (1847-1933) – British Political reformer of Irish origin, women's rights activist, theosophist and orator – was amongst the most powerful voices of the Indian National movement, urging women to join the cause and actively participate in the movement. She was famous for her extremely compelling and powerful public speeches that passionately advocated social justice, women's rights and Home Rule for both India and Ireland (Taylor, 1992). Meanwhile around the same period, in 1913, the seventh *International Women Suffrage Alliance Conference (IWSAC)* was held at Budapest. Kumari Kumudini Mitra attended the conference as the delegate representing Indian women (Chatterjee M. , 2001).

Before the IWSA Conference, Kumudini Mitra was already an active voice within the public arena, demanding a reassessment of women's positions and rights alongside national revolts against British rule. In 1907 Kumudini and her sister Basanti Mitra founded a Bengali monthly journal *Suprabhat,* which plainly

advocated for a revolutionary nationalistic movement in India including violence, as necessary.

> This was the era of violent and non-violent activism to expel the British from the subcontinent. Throughout the journal, therefore, the editors called upon Bengali women to support the rise of revolutionary nationalism and provide covert support to the underground terrorist movement. One of Kumudini Mitra's own poems published in the second issue of Suprabhat gave voice to the homeland of India as Mother – and demanded a violent overthrow of the existing order. […] But this invocation of action came alongside other calls for women's rights. It was not uncommon to see the same journal call for revolutionary terrorism and for women's education, for women's rights in marriage and outside of the marriage contract, for women's rights in the national struggle and in the law (Armstrong, 2017, p. 2) .

The authors and editors of journals like *Suprabhat*, had in turn based the ground work of their activist action on movements and women's activism that date back to the 19th century, when caste injustice and the abuse of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* working women by landowners was rife. These movements also fought against cultures of abusive marriage while seeking to establish education for girls. Admittedly change has been extremely slow and many of the issues that were being addressed then remain unresolved today, two centuries later. The main

intersecting components to the Indian women's movements from the very beginning were social reform, leftist and nationalist feminism. These three components of feminism in India have been present throughout the twentieth century and have interchangeably fed, clashed and sustained each other.

The social reform feminism which, as stated earlier was initially initiated and led by Hindu and Muslim men from the educated Indian elite and Christian colonial officials, sought to confront the established social structures and gendered hierarchal religious practices. It established as a priority reforms that would provide improved conditions for women as wives, widows and daughters, within marriage as an institution. By 1880, many Indian women from the elite classes began to join efforts with these initial campaigns, taking active roles in promoting the causes.

2.1.1 RAMMOHAN ROY (1772-1833) AND OTHERS

Noteworthy amongst the initial pioneers is the visionary social reformer Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), – also spelt Rammohun[44] – often considered to be the father of modern India. See: (2.1.1) FIGURE - 24. He was amongst the first intellectuals of the Indian sub-continent to "seriously engage with the challenges posed by modernity to traditional social structures and ways of being. He was also one of the first Indians whose thought and practice were not circumscribed by the constraints of kin, caste and religion" (Guha, 2011, p. 27). Rammohan Roy was a key player in carrying through the fight to legally prohibit *Sati*. Sati was the upper caste Hindu tradition of widow burning, where a new widow apparently threw herself of her own volition, – but in fact succumbed to extreme social pressure, or was literally and forcefully thrown – on to her husband's burning funeral pyre by close relatives, egged on by whole villages. In 1829 the newly

[44] Many of the names and surnames that appear in this study are prone to have variations in spelling and will appear with slight differences in different sources. This is a typical characteristic of Indian names which are often pre or pro fixed with traditional forms of address that get incorporated into the names. For example, Gangadevi or Ganga Devi; Kamala Devi could also be Kamaladevi; and the surname Chattopadhyay is also spelt Chattopadhyaya.

appointed governor general of India working alongside the efforts of Rammohan Roy declared the practice of Sati as officially illegal and punishable in the Bengal Indian Sati Regulation Act., Resolution No. XVII, (Rana, 2017). Over the years the law was redrafted at various times, the last being the 1987 Rajasthan Sati Prevention Act and the Central Government Legislation termed the Commission of Sati Prevention Act, 1987. This is currently the only legislation on Sati applicable to all of India except Jammu and Kashmir, (Rana, 2017).

Prior to the law, previous legislation maintained many discrepancies regarding the extent of the crime and its punishability; dependant on whether the act of *Sati* was considered murder or consensual. We must bear in mind that these are clear cases of domestic violence, whatever the euphemistic term within the context of culture and rituals might be. They are implicitly teeming with the problematic issues of grey areas regarding consensual, coercion and force, not to mention the human obligation to dissuade a suicidal act of such magnitude, were that to be the case; versus how to distinguish or even evidence the distinctions.

Despite the established legislation in place, known cases of *Sati* have continued to be reported, some leading to a flurry of prominent media coverage while other others remain virtually unperceived. Most have led to little or no real public action towards true reform.

(2.1.1) FIGURE - 24 A, B & C

A –*Rammohun Roy*. College Green, Bristol, UK, (1997). This Statue was built in Roy's memory, by Niranjan Sarkar at the site where he suddenly died when on a visit and where he was posteriorly buried in 1833. Retrieved from: (http://www.bbc.co.uk/bristol/content/articles/2008/10/03/rammohun_roy_feature.shtml https://www.nyoooz.com/features/lifestyle/raja-ram-mohan-roy-the-pioneer-of-modern-india-remembered-by-google-doodle.html/386/

B – *The Rajah Rammohan Roy*. Courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts Collection, UK, (1826). [Drawing, pen and coloured inks and wash on cream laid paper], by Samuel De Wilde (ca. 1751 - 1832), 107 mm x 99 mm. Gift of Leverhulme Trust, 1936. Retrieved from: https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/the-rajah-rammohan-roy

C – H. P. Briggs, (n.d.). *Portrait of Rammohan Roy*. Courtesy of the Bristol Museum, UK. Retrieved from: https://www.nyoooz.com/features/lifestyle/raja-ram-mohan-roy-the-pioneer-of-modern-india-remembered-by-google-doodle.html/386/

Prominent examples are the notorious case of 18 year old *Roop Kanwar* which occurred in 1987, the *Mathura* case in 1991, the cases in Banda which point to seven incidents since 1952, the teenager case, *Pawan*, on September 26 1994, – saved by police intervention seconds before the act was consumed – the case of

Kuttubai, a 65 year old woman on February 6, 2002, and *Janakrani*, on August 21 2006, both in Madhya Pradesh, (Rana, 2017); (BBC News, 2002); (BBC News, 2006).

It is clear that incidents of Sati continue to be spurred on by mob behaviour in villages that continue to uphold this abhorrent crime in the name of tradition, religion and culture, as well as due to the impunity enjoyed by the majority of perpetrators of the act. Several case trials, including those taken to the Supreme Court have resulted in the acquittal of the accused citing "absence of evidence" (Joseph & Sharma, 2006, p. n.p. Chap. 6). Often suicide is alleged and the sum result is that there is little apparent zeal for real action against the practice often even amongst the so called educated members of society. Additionally, there appears to be a continued issue and debate regarding the language surrounding Sati; suicide on the part of the dead widow, coerced suicide, homicide or murder. Meanwhile, incidents continue to be reported almost increasingly and at an alarming rate. "[…] the practice shows no sign of abating; in fact, it appears to be moving beyond its traditional boundaries" (Joseph & Sharma, 2006, p. n.p. chap. 6).

> While the elections and the cricket hog all the attention, the first purported case of widow immolation in Bihar has gone virtually unnoticed. Bihar has topped in every possible dubious distinction, but Sati has been reported from the benighted state *for the first time,* (The Asian Age, 5 April 2004, as cited in Joseph and Sharma, 2006, chap. 6).

Geraldine Forbes states that the second half of the nineteenth century saw the presence of reform groups all over British India with specific focus on the issues of "sati, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, *purdah,*[45] prohibitions of female education, devadasis (temple dancers wedded to the gods), and the patrilocal joint family" (Forbes, 1996, p. 19). There were numerous male reformers who embraced the women's question, in many cases due to experiences they had lived within their own families.

> Their ideas on gender were rooted in personal experience; during their lives they attempted to change those with whom they lived and worked. They were not simply reacting to British pressure – these issues were very real and they responded to them with passion (Forbes, 1996, p. 20).

Keshup Chandra Sen (1838 - 1884), was a Hindu philosopher and social reformer. He organised numerous relief campaigns for the poor and promoted literacy by setting up schools for children and adults. Keshup Chandra Sen was acquainted with Rammohan Roy and was also responsible for publishing accessible reading material for everyone (2019). He was a vocal advocate against child marriage and worked towards the redefinition of women's roles by making

[45] Veil to cover the face behind which Hindu and Muslim women of certain regions were and are forced to remain.

them participants in schools, religious gatherings and activities that were outside their traditional roles (Forbes, 1996). Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), from Gujarat, in west India, also considered to be one of the *Makers of Modern India*, was a religious leader and philosopher who despite being a sworn Hindu spend his life preaching against Hindu doctrines, customs and rituals that he considered meaningless, oppressive and inhuman. He was a firm condemner of such ills as the caste system, untouchability, child marriage and forced widowhood; and especially customs like the marriage of young girls to older men, the dowry system and polygamy. As Geraldine Forbes points out, there were numerous reformers throughout the country and amongst all communities; their common and main concern was to address the issues of availability of education and the different issues around marriage for girls and women (Forbes, 1996).

(2.1.1) FIGURE - 25 A, B & C

A – *Keshub Chunder Sen*, Hindu Philosopher. India, (1870), [antique print, wood engraved print]. From *The Graphic*, a British weekly illustrated newspaper; first published on 4 December 1869, by William Luson Thomas' company, Illustrated Newspapers Limited. Retrieved from: https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/INDIA-Keshub-Chunder-Sen-Hindu-Philosopher-Antique-Print-1870-/181478106011

B – *Keshub Chandra Sen*.
Retrieved from: https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/being-tolerant-the-bengali-way-rise-and-fall-of-the-brahmo-samaj/cid/1699071

C – Photograph by Srijut Krishnaravji, (1874). *Dayananda Saraswati*, religious leader and philosopher from Gujarat. Jabalpur, India.
Retrieved from:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dayananda_Saraswati.jpg

2.1.2 PANDIT ISWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR (1820-1891)

Within the early social reform feminism movement it is worth looking at the humanist scholar *Pandit*[46] Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). See: (2.1.2) FIGURE - 26 A, B & C. Educator, social reformer and philanthropist, he dedicated his life to the cause of girls' education and widow remarriage. Geraldine Forbes' study offers significant details of Vidyasagar's childhood; factors that undoubtedly shaped his humanist values and philosophy. Vidyasagar was eight years old when his father took him on a long walk of approximately 100 kilometres, from his village, Birsingha in west Bengal, to Calcutta; in the hope of getting him admitted into an English language Hindu College. The school fees were too high and Vidyasagar was admitted to study in a Sanskrit College.

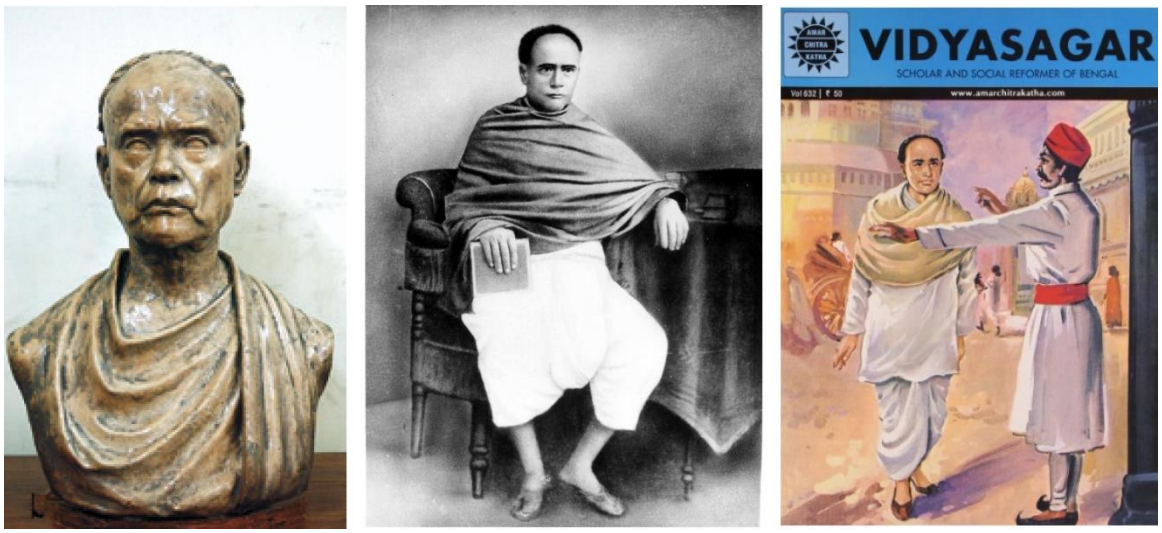
During the period of his study in Calcutta, Vidyasagar resided in the home of friend whose sister was a child widow. According to Forbes, this was Vidyasagar's first encounter with the hardships and penurious conditions endured, in this case by a young girl, as a child widow. Vidyasagar's guru was to later marry a girl several years younger than him, – a fact that provoked Vidyasagar to

[46] Title of respect and reverence awarded to a very learned scholar and humanist, recognised as being extremely wise and of great talent, as also in Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

renounce his hospitality and teachings – only to die a year later leaving her behind as a widow with no abode or means of support (Forbes, 1996). The suffering he witnessed these young widows endure was to make him spend his life fighting for the cause of education for women, widow remarriage, and opposition of polygamy. He is known to have shocked his peer orthodox upper-class Brahmins of the period with the publication of at least two manifestos on widow remarriage – which culminated in the recognition of remarried widow's sons as legitimate heirs, – as well as campaigning untiringly against child marriage (Zafar, 2014).

Vidyasagar's first publication in 1885 sold two thousand copies within the first week of publication. Three thousand reprints also sold out, leading to a third reprint of ten thousand copies (Forbes, 1996). His publications earned him insults, abuse and death threats. Nevertheless, amidst voracious opposition and criticism, Vidyasagar remained throughout his life undeterred, in his revolutionary stance as one of the first feminists of the times. He went to such lengths as to reinterpret the Hindu religious scripts or *Shastra* in his attempts to further the cause for widow remarriage.

> Because widow marriage was prohibited in accordance with the general interpretation of the Shastra, Vidyasagar understood that unless he engaged with and reinterpreted the very Shastra that forbade widow marriage, it would be nearly impossible to mould public opinion in favour of his cause (Zafar, 2014, p. 116).



(2.1.2) FIGURE - 26 A, B & C

A – Jadunath Pal, (19th century). *Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar*. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, [Clay bust] Courtesy of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat society. Gift of Gaganendranath Tagore. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/hail-the-ocean-of-learning-185th-birth-anniversary-display/cid/1268811

B –*Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar*. (Photograph taken before 1891), scanned from Vidyasagar University Prospectus. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ishwar_Chandra_Vidyasagar.jpg

C – *Vidyasagar*: Scholar and Social Reformer of Bengal. Amar Chitra Katha/ACK Media publications, (2008), (Vol. 632). Retrieved from: https://www.abebooks.com/book-search/title/vidyasagar/book/

Urging the British to pass the necessary legislation that would permit widow remarriage, Vidyasagar collected almost one thousand signatures in a petition in favour of such a legislation that he sent to the Indian Legislative Council. The Council also received thousands of signatures against the widow remarriage legislation, finally deciding "to support the enlightened minority" (Forbes, 1996, p. 22). The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856.

Unfortunately, the widow remarriage Act did not succeed in promoting significant change for widows in India, as few widows remarried. Vidyasagar's son is known to have married a widow; however, the issues regarding the fundamental rights of widows as well as the practice of child marriage continue to be unresolved plagues in Indian societies today.

Nevertheless, there can be no question regarding Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's quest for a more humane society. Vidyasagar was also a vociferous supporter of women's education while also vehemently opposing polygamy. He was a firm believer that "the denial of education to women was responsible for many of their problems" (Desai & Thakkar, 2001, p. 3). As stated, he used his phenomenal knowledge and command of Sanskrit and the scriptures to present his arguments cohesively and convincingly to all those who opposed him.

The issue of polygamy during this era in India was a particular source of distress for numerous women. The *Kulin Brahmins,* an upper caste of aristocratic males who were considered to be particularly eligible for marriage were able to marry as many women as they pleased. Vidyasagar, who found this custom particularly repugnant, carried out a study with data of 133 Kulin Brahmins, in his fight to outlaw the practice of polygamy, and highlight the evils inherent in the practice. According to the data that Vidyasagar collected which evidenced the inhumanity and extreme abuse that was inherent in the system, the figures presented ahead are nothing short of shocking.

Vidyasagar documented numerous cases that were nothing short of atrocious. Amongst them are cases such as a fifty year old man who had married 107 times, a fifty-five year old man who had eighty wives, a sixty-four year old who had seventy two wives, and similarly despicable figures that were went on interminably. In his attempt to eradicate the system of *kulinism* polygamy with legal legislation that would outlaw it, Vidyasagar collected 2,500 signatures, which resulted in no action at all. Ten years later he was to collect 21,000 signatures which still resulted in no action by the government. He continued his campaigns against the system with manifestos and other actions, but was unsuccessful in getting a legal response that would outlaw the practice (Forbes, 1996).

Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's other great quest was for the mass education of girls and boys of all castes and social levels. As a scholar who held specific official positions of certain prominence and influence; such as the post of Special School Inspector for the districts of Hooghly, Midnapur, Burdhwan and Nadia in the regions of West Bengal, Vidyasagar used his position and influence to set up a system of schooling that included forty girls' schools as well as the management of a specific girls' school which had been set up in 1849 by J. E. D. Bethune of the Governor General's Council, that was suffering certain difficulties. (Forbes, 1996). Unfortunately, much of Vidyasagar's efforts bore little fruit. Despite the tremendous work and energy he put into his campaigns, widow

marriage amongst the upper castes in Hinduism was never fully integrated or accepted in society.[47]

Widows were often considered responsible for the misfortune in terms of ill health, accident or any other calamities that had befallen their husbands and caused their demise. As such, widows from the higher Hindu castes were obliged to remove and hand over all their jewellery and other valuables. Permitted only minimum and plain food, they often became victims of abuse and rape by local men, often including members of their own families. They were even at risk of being sent off to urban brothels as merchandise (Forbes, 1996). Geraldine Forbes cites Vidyasagar's biographer as stating that although

> […] he strove to introduce fundamental reforms within the colonial context. His proposals proved too radical for many of his contemporaries and although the colonial government criticized Indian customs, they were unwilling to back his efforts for change. Vidyasagar personified the best of the nineteenth-century social reformers; arguing for social change he

[47] Although The Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act was passed in 1856 by the British-Indian government in response to the social reform movement and campaigns by Vidyasagar and others, it was never quite accepted amongst the higher Hindu castes. In most cases, widows in current society continue to remain destitute except for exceptional circumstances (Narasimhan N. , 2017).

demonstrated an "untiring will for positive social action" (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 23).

Lucy Carroll outlines the curse that widowhood spelt and often continues to spell for upper caste Hindu women in India.

> The problem of widows—and especially of child widows—was largely a prerogative of the higher Hindu castes among whom child marriage was practised and remarriage prohibited. Irrevocably, eternally married as a mere child, the death of the husband she had perhaps never known left the wife a widow, an inauspicious being whose sins in a previous life had deprived her of her husband, and her parents-in-law of their son, in this one. Doomed to a life of prayer, fasting, and drudgery, unwelcome at the celebrations and auspicious occasions that are so much a part of Hindu family and community life, her lot was scarcely to be envied (Carrol, 2008, p. 79).

The prohibition of widow remarriage was not only a question of protecting family honour, – "widow celibacy was lauded by the elite as a hallmark of respectability" (Forbes, 1996, p. 23) – but also brought into question the issue of property inheritance rights. As widows could not remarry, the property that they would supposedly be entitled to inherit from their deceased husband remained in the possession of the husband's parents and brothers. After the passing of The

Widows Remarriage Act a different set of issues arose. Geraldine Forbes states that "from the perspective of women's rights, the new law often proved harmful" (Forbes, 1996, p. 23). This was because the law created confusion and communities where remarriage had been customary began to have discrepancies regarding property rights, often resulting in widows being deprived of their rightful inheritance. In the last few years there have been cases where the Indian high courts have overruled petitions by deceased husbands' families to disqualify widows who have remarried from inheriting their dead husband's property (Chaudhari, 2015).

It is worth noting that according to records, as highlighted by Lucy Carrol, the issue of widow remarriage was never a problem that affected the so called lower castes, specifically the *Sudra* and so called *Untouchables*. Not only did these communities not practice child marriage, they apparently had absolutely no restrictions on widow remarriage (Carrol, 2008). However, although remarriage does not seem to have been an issue of conflict amongst non-Brahmin castes previous to the nineteenth century, in her translation of Tarabai Shinde's *Comparison Between Woman and Men*, Rosalind O' Hanlon draws attention to the ambiguity regarding questions of how the upper castes customs affected societal practice amongst the other castes through the nineteenth century.

Hanlon quotes the journalist, reformer Balshastri Jambhekar (1812-1846), who states that at some point in the nineteenth century, customs around remarriage began to carry what appeared to be a social stigma, as the lower castes attempted

to imitate higher castes (as cited in O'Hanlon, 1994). O'Hanlon herself, in contextualising the way in which the nineteenth century saw the creation of traditions based on Brahminical Hindu scriptures that fundamentally shaped gender relations – which were clearly detrimental and oppressive for women – declares that the religious texts and values became extended widely throughout Hindu society, resulting in the application of "what had been a narrowly applied model for social exclusiveness and respectability into one for which wider circles of upper and middle peasant castes, petty government employees, artisans and small tradespeople" (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 10). O'Hanlon also highlights the progressively rising rigidness and inflexibility of boundaries that also became increasingly impermeable and separated from the state as private and unchangeable domains, outside the competency of the state, within what was categorised as "domestic and public spheres" (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 10).

Historians have suggested that the changes mentioned previously were fuelled by the British administration's gradual replacement of Muslim staff by Brahmin elites in colonial administration all over the country. This resulted in the wide dissemination of Brahminical models of society, behaviour and hierarchy. These were furthered by diverse Indian groups such as "the *Arya Samaj* in north India, the *Brahmo Samaj* in Bengal or the *Prarthana* or *Satyashdhak Samajes* in the west also […] attempted to 'purify' Indian social life and return it to its earlier noble simplicity" (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 11). It would seem that the warrior-peasant castes that had normally enjoyed political strategies of inclusion and incorporation

were affected by the gradual scarcity and increasing prices of land causing them to begin to lay more importance on exclusion and distinction, where community boundaries became less permeable to outsiders. "[…] different classes […] became more sharply concerned with demarcating gradations of status and wealth; (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 11).

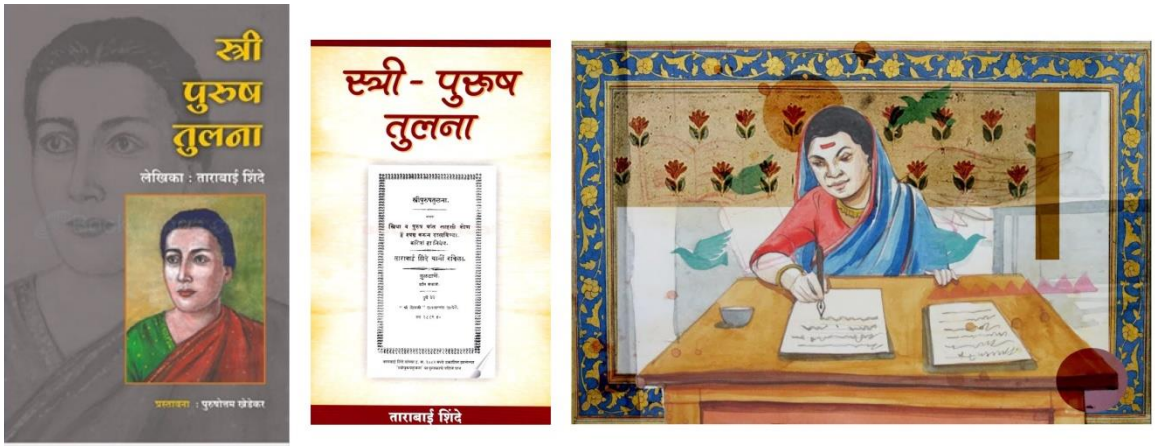
Added to these factors, the British cut their role and links with caste identity and political power, areas which had always been mobile and flexible due to the traditionally active intervention of both Hindu and Indo-Muslim rulers as conflict regulators of an extensive range of social and religious institutions. The policy of the East India Company that had gained immense territorial dominion and the "colonial government's own developing techniques of rule" (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 11) represented a severe reduction of responsibility and intervention by the state and led to increasingly severe demarcations of inflexible caste structures within the society as well as progressively more rigid subordination of "women more firmly to caste and family authority" (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 12). This situation can be demonstrated through the use of the *Purdah* amongst the warrior-peasant caste women in Bombay. Records show that these societies did not have customs which practiced the use of *Purdah*, but they began to adopt them in the nineteenth century. Similarly, middle caste groups started imitating their higher caste political rivals, as a means of gaining status, by adopting the policy of prevention of widow remarriage (Singh A. , 1995).

2.1.3 TARABAI SHINDE (1850-1910)

Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) was a socially well to do Marathi housewife who was unknown, until an 1881 court ruling in Surat, Gujarat, in western India, sentenced a young Brahmin widow to death for supposedly killing her unborn illegitimate child. The ruling was appealed and eventually reduced to five years; however, according to records, the case so inflamed the young Tarabai, it led to her writing *"Stri-purusha-tulana – A comparison between Women and Men"*, a text that for many is considered to be amongst the first feminist manifestos in India (Forbes, 1996, p. 22). See: (2.1.3) FIGURE - 27. The text articulated the women's questions and the unjust hypocrisy of societal norms with brutal criticism and harsh questioning as regards the supposed virtues of men versus the flawed characters of women as per the orthodox Hindu scriptures. When first published, *Stri-purusha-tulana* did not receive significant following; however, it apparently became more well-known after it was republished in 1975 by S. G. Malshe and translated into English by Rosalind O' Hanlon (2019); (Tarabai Shinde Women Study Center Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, 2014).

Tarabai's text, inspired by the debates of widow remarriage and specifically the case of the unfortunate widow, Vijaylakashmi, "forged a passionate critique of patriarchal constructions of the feminine and thus challenged the essentializing

systems of male public discourse" (Haynes & Prakash, 1991, p. 14). Tarabai also presented the possible fact of a "constant presence of resistance by south Asian women within their households and families that are quite analogous to everyday struggles found among other subaltern groupings" (Haynes & Prakash, 1991, p. 14).



(2.1.3) FIGURE - 27 A, B & C

A – *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men), original publication in Marathi, (1882). Retrieved from: http://www.bamu.ac.in/ts-wsc/AboutWomensStudyCenter/AboutTarabaiShinde.aspx https://www.bookganga.com/eBooks/Books/Details/5552543871672873985

B –Marathi edition book cover image showing the original manuscript. Retrieved from: https://www.bookganga.com/eBooks/Books/Details/5443299224344912534

C – ©Ekta Singha, (2016), *Tarabai Shinde as a Prolific Writer*. [Illustration]. Retrieved from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/_/cwEbWifoCK-LXg

In her critique, Tarabai articulated an invective attack against the male systems of representation, the religious texts that promoted male superiority and

authority, as well as the societal practices that served to strengthen the grip of patriarchy. Her position was to turn the tables on men, contesting accepted practices by using the same language and structures of dominion that incorporated hostility and contempt towards women, directed straight back at masculinity. She used well thought out strategies and the language of mockery and ridicule that was not uncommon in non-Brahmin disputes, transferring the supposed inadequacies of women, according to religious patriarchal discourse, directly back at men (O'Hanlon, 1991).

In Tarabai's writing we find "the most meticulously worked-out critique of the men who had sold the nation for a few comforts and were content to ape their rulers" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 163). *Stri-purusha-tulana* was Tarabai Shinde's only published book and it might partly have been because of the negative and disdainful reception the publication suffered. In any case, as O'Hanlon points out, Tarabai Shinde demonstrated resistance and power through her efforts "to defend the honour of all my sister countrywomen" (as cited in O'Hanlon, 1991, p. 103). Perhaps most importantly, Tarabai Shinde's piece is an example of the "broad scope of her feminism" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 163), as a Marathi woman who takes up the cause of a Gujarati Brahmin widow comparing the subjugation of women by their menfolk with the sufferings of artisans and the ordinary folk under the oppressive arm of imperialism. She thus "gives voice to a nationalist force unmatched elsewhere in India" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 163). Unfortunately, as Geraldine Forbes notes "Tarabai Shinde's cry for equality went unheeded in a

world where reformers wanted to help women, not accord them equal status" (Forbes, 1996, p. 22).

According to the historian Sumit Sarkar, the nineteenth century social reformers were mainly concerned with "modifying relationships within their own families and sought only "limited and controlled emancipation" of their womenfolk" (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 27). It would seem that women themselves were at times slow in embracing the "schemes created for their regeneration; more often they were portrayed as opposed to their own liberation" (Forbes, 1996, p. 27). Questionably, what appears clear is that longstanding entrenched customs are far from easily subverted, as the oppressed and oppressor each assume their roles. Although the nineteenth century reformers sought education and liberation from the worst evils of tradition for women, – child marriage, sati, polygyny and marginalisation or permanent widowhood – "many of them were unwilling to relinquish the power of the patriarchy or redistribute wealth" (Forbes, 1996, p. 27). Meanwhile, in most cases, women were still expected to conform to the norms of being "devoted to home and family" (Forbes, 1996, p. 28).

The question of education for women in nineteenth century India was punctured with inconsistency and dilemma. Education appeared to be the promise towards emancipation and rights that would offer children, in this case girls, the possibility of becoming responsible, independent and deciding citizens. However, as stated earlier, many of the reformers seemed to endorse women's education

exclusively with the idea of converting them into "more fitting homemakers, mothers and companions for the emerging urban middle-class men" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 163). Freedom and equality were not perceived as one or in the same light for men and women. This was clearly demonstrated, for example, by the contradictory positions extrapolated regarding the appropriate curricular content for women. Conservative voices advocated very simple skills that would make of women better wives and mothers with minimum emphasis on writing, mathematics or history, asserting that knowledge of hygiene, morals and sewing were the only necessary areas of development. Acquiring skills in the English language was considered as pointless, seen as it was as being required only outside the domestic sphere. Learning of music and the practice of sports were viewed as extremely controversial, alleged as "so much activity – of spirit or of body – might excite the passions" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 163).

Even the more progressive voices, those who argued for a common curricular plans for boys and girls, often seemed to consider that the ultimate purpose of women's education was to make them "more efficient homemakers and more efficient mothers" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 164). Many women at the time seemed also to agree with this position. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita assert, due to this predominant philosophy, there appears to be little that distinguishes the work and writing of women from the men of the period. Nevertheless, along the course of the nineteenth century the model of women's lives and concepts of *the perfect wife* began to slowly evolve. Towards the end of the nineteenth century

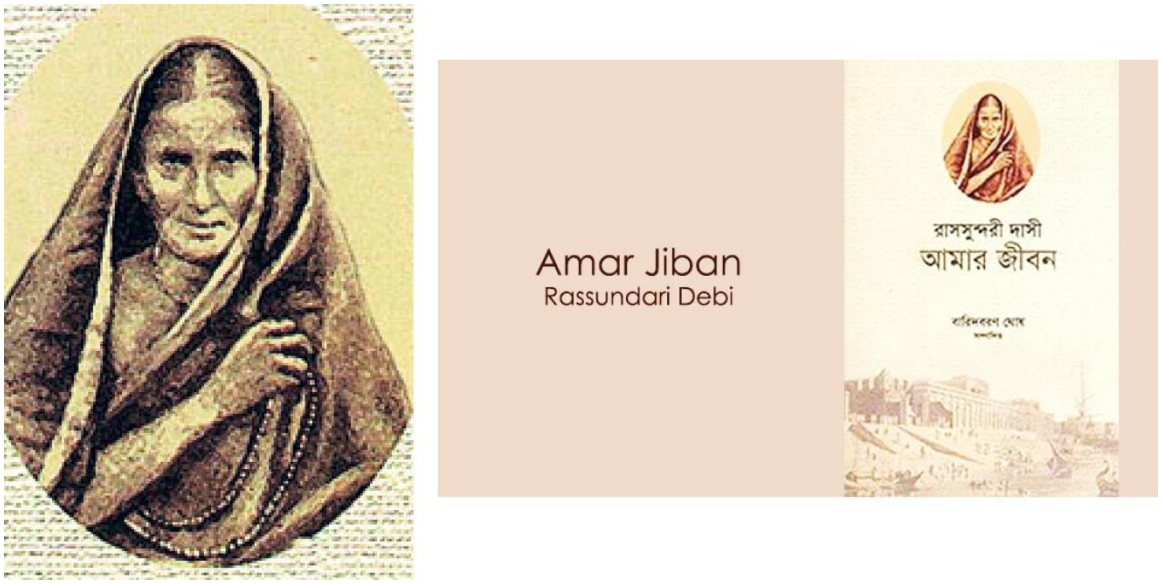
there were numerous women who were educated, independent and increasingly visible and involved in public affairs. Family patterns began to change and more progressive parents who placed importance on women's education and were concerned about their daughters' wellbeing began to delay arranging their marriages; in some cases women continued their education after marriage. Despite these advances, change was nowhere near linearly progressive or permanent and advances, as can be seen even today, have been extremely slow. What is certain is that many women began to take advantage of the increasing opportunities of acquiring an education and thereby began the first moves towards independence and control over their lives and future.

The second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century witnessed "an extraordinary number of autobiographies" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 160) as women began to leave testimonies of their personal lives and experiences as well as the numerous contradictions and complexities of their roles as wives and mothers within the traditional society and as women in the colonial context. Some of the earliest women's memories from nineteenth century India are accounts of their intense desire to access education and learn to read, and the ways in which they overcame barriers and juggled domestic obligations with the stolen moments they used to educate themselves.

2.1.4 RASSUNDARI DEVI (1810-1899)

Rassundari Devi, born around about 1810, is recorded as being amongst the earliest Bengali writers; her autobiography, *Amar Jiban* – translated as *'My Life'*, is the first autobiography to be published in Bengali (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). See: (2.1.4) FIGURE - 28. Rassundari was a child bride and assumed responsibility of her extended family at a very young age, caring for her invalid mother-in-law and twelve children, – not all survived. At this point, the advances of social reform had reached few upper caste Hindu women. Her achievements were particularly laudable considering her personal circumstances and daily life; as she pursued her desire to learn to read, struggling in secrecy, in the scant hours that were left after her arduous day. Rassundari Devi happened to live in a tiny village that was far removed from the metropolis of Calcutta, where campaigns by associations and movements promoting the issue of women's education were underway well before the first women's schooling centres were established.

In her autobiography, Rassundari Devi describes in great detail the drudgery of her daily routine which absorbed and filled her days completely, alongside the inner conflict and turmoil she endured from her feelings of guilt as she strove to escape the routine and fulfill her passionate yearning to learn to read. "Is this my fate because I am a woman? I am a woman does it necessarily mean that trying to educate myself is a crime?" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 191).



(2.1.4) FIGURE - 28

Rassundari Devi and her autobiography *Amar Jiban.* Retrieved from: https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/view-from-top/cid/1266905 https://feminisminindia.com/2017/03/23/rassundari-devi-essay/

Rassundari Devi's biography was pioneering in her presentation with detailed descriptions of the intimate thoughts and personal circumstances that could reflect the thoughts and feelings of many women of the period. She talks about the joy and wonder she felt as a young pregnant mother at eighteen, marvelling at the miracle of the child growing inside her; just as in later chapters she laments the fact that her identity as a woman is limited to the fact of her motherhood of her children. When she was widowed in February 1869, her hair was shaved leaving her bald, according to the painful customs of the time. She describes the ordeal she suffers as "more painful than death" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 191). As a widow she writes "I have been widowed. I feel ashamed and

hurt by the realization that even if a woman has lived her life fully, has brought up her children and leaves behind her sons and daughters to carry on; her widowhood is still considered a misfortune (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 191).

Before her marriage, when still very young Rassundari Devi had witnessed young boys being taught by missionaries and had attended the occasional class. The circumstances that surrounded women like Rassundari Devi who fought against the currents of their times were as exceptional as the women themselves. "[…] given conventional notions about the impropriety, even danger, of women's education we can be certain these headstrong women were a minority" (Forbes, 1996, p. 33). Geraldine Forbes quotes a report by William Adam on the State of Education in Bengal, that states "A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow" (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 33). The report also highlighted the fear shared by Hindus and Muslims that literacy, – "a knowledge of letters" – also encouraged "female intrigue" (Forbes, 1996, p. 33).

In a society where women were subjugated to absolute dependency on the male members of the family; initially their fathers, then their husbands and finally their sons, all the customary prayers and rituals that were celebrated were carried out so as to ensure the longevity of their menfolk. Thus, in such a society that understood literacy in women as courting the death of her husband, the pursuit of learning literally became the pursuit of death through suicide. Additionally,

bearing in mind that this was a gender segregated society in the literal sense of the phrase, that is, men and women occupied separate spaces, in every sense of the word; women interacted mainly only with other women, and it was these very same women who enforced the religious and cultural prohibitions against education.[48] Before the 1870s many of the women who learnt to read and write clandestinely were often obliged to go to great lengths to hide their 'undesired hobby and accomplishments', risking severe retribution were they to be discovered. In some cases mothers might have been encouraging towards their daughters' interests in literacy and knowledge, but once married, such tolerance from mothers-in-law and other women members of the husbands' home were practically inexistent.

> It is difficult to impute motives to the women who vehemently opposed education. Subjects of a hard patrilineal, patriarchal system, they were not in a position to oppose prevailing codes. Their survival depended on upholding the status quo and an educated stranger in their midst posed an

[48] Sexual segregation is often still the norm in most societies and situations in India. Schools are often non-coeducational, – even when they are coeducational, boys and girls are mostly seated separately, – and with few exceptions, social gatherings, whether large occasions like weddings or small and intimate social meetings, tend to have separate seating spaces pre-allocated; thus effectively maintaining men and women in different spaces throughout. See: (2.1) FIGURE - 29

> obvious threat. Those girls and women who were eager to learn had no recourse but to look to the men who controlled their lives (Forbes, 1996, p. 33).

It took progressive reformers' steadfast efforts that lasted well into the second half of the nineteenth century before there were any real signs of advances in women's education. It required government intervention and their offer of financial support, added to the support of urban professional elites towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, before real results were perceived in areas such as increasing number of institutions and a growing number of educated women. The first Indian Education commission, known as the Hunter commission which was set up in 1882 recognised the fact that 98 percent of girls of school age were not in school. In order to rectify the situation, the Commission report vouched for the necessity of specific grants and more aids to help and fund girls' schools than boys' as well as the establishment of scholarships and prizes specifically for girls. As a result of these strategies, the next couple of decades witnessed great growth and expansion in higher education. While 1881-1882 only boasted six women in Indian universities, by the turn of the century there were 264 women enrolled. Similarly, enrolment in secondary school education during the same period rose from 2,054 to 41,582 (Forbes, 1996).

(2.1) FIGURE - 29

Soniya Patel, (2019). This photograph taken in December 2019 at a co-education school function clearly demonstrates the segregation of spaces mentioned earlier. The girl schoolchildren can be seen to be seated on the right with the female members of the public behind the girls at the back of the hall, also on the right. The boy school children are seated on the left and male audiences are also seated behind them at the back of the hall, on the left.

2.1.5 PANDITA RAMABAI SARASWATI (1858-1922)

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922) has been hailed by the humanist scholar A. B. Shah, who published her letters and correspondence with the backing of the Maharashtra State Board for Literacy and Culture in 1977 as

> […] the greatest woman produced by modern India and one of the greatest Indians in all history. Her achievements as a champion of women's rights and as a pioneer in the fields of women's education and social reform remain unrivalled even after a lapse of nearly a century since she first appeared on the scene. […] She was the first to introduce the kindergarten system of education and also the first to give a vocational bias to school education in India. Most important of all, she was the first to rebel against the inhuman slavery to which widows were subjected in Hindu society and to lay the foundations for a movement for women's liberation in India. And in all these undertakings she depended essentially on her own inner resources. While she accepted, even invited, assistance from all over the world, she never compromised her principles for the sake of pleasing anyone (Shah A. B., 1977, p. 10).

On her death, *The Times of India* remembered her as "one of the makers of modern India", (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 73). However, Meera Kosambi states

that Pandita Ramabai's person as a "solitary women leader of the movement for women's emancipation in nineteenth century Maharashtra" has been largely neglected by contemporary Hindu society due to her conversion from Hinduism to Christianity (Kosambi, 1988). It is not only fitting but absolutely necessary that a study such as this should dedicate space to the woman who has been named "a legend in her own lifetime", and whose work was of particular relevance to the emancipation of women in India. See: (2.1.5) FIGURE - 30.

Geraldine Forbes states that Ramabai was "truly remarkable as a pioneer in woman's education and rebel champion of women's rights" (Forbes, 1996, p. 46). What perhaps stands out about Pandita Ramabai is the fact that she was largely "a solitary woman leader of the women's cause" (Kosambi, 1988, p. 38) and her status as such has still not been equalled, according to Meera Kosambi. Ramabai was amongst the very small number of women of the nineteenth century who were able to live of their writing. She had an unconventional childhood, which in many ways, doubtlessly, prepared her for her monumental role in gender reform as an adult.



(2.1.5) FIGURE - 30 A, B & C

A – Pandita Ramabai and her daughter Manorama. (No date or details). Retrieved from: https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2009/24-april/faith/indian-convert-who-thought-for-herself-1

B – Mary Evans, (n.d.). *Pandita Ramabai Dongre Medhavi*. Retrieved from: https://fineartamerica.com/featured/pandita-ramabai-dongre-medhavi-indian-mary-evans-picture-library.html https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/obituaries/pandita-ramabai-overlooked.html

C – Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, (1888). The *high-caste Hindu woman*. [Digital Rare Book]. Published by Fleming H. Revell co., (1901). New York Retrieved from: https://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/postDetail.php?id=196174216674_10151376807206675

Meera Kosambi succinctly summarises in no uncertain terms the period in which Ramabai was born versus the enormous significance of the contribution she made.

The social context for Ramabai's life was the traditional upper-caste Hindu society which mandated pre-pubertal marriage and immediate post-pubertal

> consummation of marriage for girls, and which denied education to women – both to stress their disprivileged status and to curb their freedom of communication. The salient issues in gender reform, therefore, were the abolition of child marriage, support for widow remarriage, and introduction of women's education. These initiatives were radical enough occasionally to trigger off open conflict between the reformist minority and the conservative majority. Reform and religion intersected repeatedly because the multiple oppression of women was justified by sacralising the patriarchal ideology which treated women as inferior and subservient to men, as born solely for a wife-mother role, and as the legal wards and property of their husbands. The reform issues therefore posed a direct challenge to both patriarchy and religion in varying degrees. The strongest challenge of all came from Pandita Ramabai herself, who interrogated both patriarchy–through her nationally and internationally famed championship of women's education – and the Hindu religion, through her conversion to Christianity and overt missionary activity (Kosambi, 1998, pp. 194-195).

Pandita Ramabai was the daughter of Anant Shastri Dongre, a renowned, and erudite Sanskrit scholar, who kindled the fury of fellow Brahmins with his determination to teach the sacred Sanskrit texts to his wife, who in turn taught their two daughters. Dongre, himself a teacher, was a firm believer in women's education. He went to great lengths and took many risks to ensure Lakshmibai,

Ramabai's mother's, literacy. Ramabai states in her biography that as her father was ailing in health by the time she was old enough to start taking lessons, her mother began teaching her when she was eight years old. She continued to instruct her until she was fifteen, teaching Ramabai also how to be autonomous and independent in her learning, so as to be able to continue her education with minimum help from others (as cited in Tharu and Lalita, 1991); (Shah A. B., 1977).

According to Kosambi, Dongre's insistence on the education of his wife and daughters generated the predictable furore in a society that denied basic literacy not only to women, but also to lower caste members of society (Kosambi, 1998). Meanwhile, Pandita Ramabai's mother, Lakshmibai was to become increasingly well versed in the sacred texts. Her growing literacy was to put her father at the receiving end of harsh condemnation by the local village pundits or scholars, and Dongre was eventually summoned to justify his position to the "chief seat of the Madhva Vaishnava sect" (Burton, 1998, p. 77).

Eventually, when Ramabai was still a baby, Anant Shastri Dongre was to take his family to different parts of the country where as teachers and readers they imparted lessons of the *Puranas* – collections of histories of ancient times – in temples. "They became the medium in postvedic age, for conveying Vedic teaching to the unlettered – all women and lower caste men" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 244). Their life as travellers meant that Ramabai had not only integrated into her person the naturalness of being continuously on the move, but that she

was brought up outside the common, strictly determined restrictions of society that other women of the time were dictated by. It is quite likely, as Meera Kosambi has argued, that Pandita Ramabai's "life of unceasing pilgrimage" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 73) contributed in part to her developing the insight that allowed her to "produce some of the most astutely gendered critiques of nationalist reform and the British Imperial civilizing mission in the nineteenth century" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 73).

Living as wandering readers and teachers was an extremely difficult life, filled with uncertainty and poverty. Dongre had initially not been a man without means, as the owner of rice fields and coconut plantations in Maharashtra. However, diverse issues led to him losing his assets and having to take up the profession of *puranikas* – readers of the ancient verses of history. Ramabai labelled it, the profession of "popularizing the stories, gods, and goddesses of the sacred texts" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 76), as opposed to having to beg for a living. She also stated that for her parents this was not only a livelihood but a means of attaining *"Moshaka,* or liberation from the everlasting trouble of reincarnation" (Burton, 1998, p. 76). The family, including Ramabai's paternal grandparents began their travelling lifestyle when Pandita Ramabai was barely six months old. She was carried from one place to the next in a cane box, thus, as she stated "My pilgrim life began when I was a little baby" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 77).

As she grew, Ramabai's father also supervised her studies and decided not to arrange the customary early marriage of his youngest daughter, considering the experience of the unhappy early marriage of her elder sister.

> My parents found that marriage in childhood was a hindrance to education, so I was not given in marriage when I was a child. […] this marriage ended in a life of unhappiness to my sister. So my father resolved that he would not do the same in my case, and as he would not part with me, I remained unmarried. This was contrary to the present Hindu custom, but though his friends and neighbours constantly reminded him of this, he paid no attention to them (Pandita Ramabai, as cited in A. B. Shah, 1977, p. 33).

Considering the period in history, one cannot underestimate the value and quality of the education that Ramabai received nor the supportive father and mother-daughter family relationship that permitted Ramabai to develop the fine intellect, judgment and critical skills necessary to grasp situations objectively, and maintain her independence and freedom of thought in all circumstances, despite the conflictive pressures and messages she was submitted to throughout her life from all directions.

> Ramabai's sketches of this period portray a close, supportive, almost idyllic family unit. Learning and ideas were at the centre of their life, and strength and nobility of character taken for granted. These memoires, it is clear, were to sustain her throughout her life (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 244).

However, the difficulties the family faced were tremendous and by the time Ramabai was sixteen, her father, mother and sister had all succumbed to famine and starvation, dying within a span of two years. Considering the tragically early demise of her parents and sister, in a society and culture where women's literacy was considered evil enough to cause widowhood and other misfortunes; it is sadly more than just symbolic to recall Ramabai's preoccupation and need to ensure wide knowledge of the respectability and numerous qualities of her parents, and particularly of her mother, as a wife and carer.

In the early twentieth century, when reminiscing about her parents' lives together, Ramabai was keen to lay emphasis on the fact of her mother's respectability and honour, recounting that she had under no circumstances allowed her education in books to interfere in the least with her wifely and motherly duties. "She performed all her home duties, cooked, washed, and did all the housework, took care of her children, attended to guests, and did all that was required of a good religious wife and mother" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 77). Antoinette Burton highlights that "Ramabai's emphasis on her mother's respectability may be read as an attempt to protect Lakshmibai's reputation as well as her father's memory from orthodox criticism almost half a century after their demise" (Burton, 1998, p. 77).

Following the death of her parents and sister, Ramabai and her brother, Shrinivas continued their pilgrimage around the country, imparting the historical

stories and knowledge they had started with their parents, but also giving lectures on education for women and social reform (Forbes, 1996). From diverse accounts of her writings, it would appear that at this stage in their lives, the faith that had accompanied their parents throughout began to desert both Ramabai and Shrinivas. They continued their strict upbringing, abiding by the caste norms and rules as per the religious scriptures; however, diverse factors added to the hardships that they continued to endure began to open cracks in their convictions causing them to start questioning the true efficiency of their prayers and religious practices or the conviction that they would be rewarded by the divine gods for their efforts to lead lives of purity and devotion. As Ramabai wrote in her memoir, *My Testimony*; "our faith in our religion had grown cold", (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 78).

According to her memoires, Ramabai and her brother covered most of the length and breadth of the country; walking *"2,000 miles"*(as cited in A. B. Shah, 1977, p. 33), travelling on foot, reaching as far north as Kashmir and all the way east to Calcutta. In her autobiography, *My Testimony*, Ramabai has stated that her brother and she were on the move for six years, during which period they were able to witness first-hand "the sufferings of Hindu women" (as cited in A. B. Shah, 1977, p. 33), all over the country. Ramabai and her brother saw an opportunity for beginning campaigns to "improve the condition of women and raise them out of their degradation" (as cited in A. B. Shah, 1977, p. 33), by addressing large gatherings of people and convincing them of the benefits of education for women and all children. In order to meet the diversity of tongues

and cultures of the areas through which they travelled, Ramabai and Shrinivas had to learn Hindi and Bengali, apart from their mother tongue Marathi, (Shah A. B., 1977). The mentioned travels added to the ones she went on later in her life effectively made Ramabai possibly the "most well-travelled person among her contemporaries" (Kosambi, as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 78).

On their arrival in Calcutta, Ramabai had her first contact with Christianity and Christian missionaries. She spent her time studying books of Hindu law and the religious *Dharma Shastras* and *Mahabharata* texts. As a young 19 year old, Ramabai took the Calcutta elite by storm with her expertise of the Sanskrit texts and language. She was given a public examination by a panel of erudite Scholars who went on to confer her with the title of *Pandita* as in learned and wise soul. She was to demonstrate as much eruditeness as many male Brahmin pundits who also began calling her *Saraswati,* in reference to the goddess of knowledge and learning; claiming that she was a "modern day incarnation of Saraswati" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 244). However, she was also subjected to ridicule and criticism, as many conservative member of Hinduism were outraged, often demonstrating their positions by jeering and causing disruption in the midst of her public appearances and speeches (Forbes, 1996).

During this period of her life, Pandita Ramabai encountered a number of paradoxical issues which were ultimately defining in her position as a social reformer, champion for women's education as well as her renouncement of Hinduism in favour of Christianity. She was invited by the scholars of Calcutta to

impart lessons to women in *purdah* about their duties according to the *Shastras* – the Hindu religious scripts, within the walls of their secluded spaces, (Burton, 1998). As Ramabai studied the *Shastras* she also became aware of what she saw as the clear "concurrence of all Hindu texts on the question of women's exclusion from *Moksha*[49] — except through reincarnation as a high-caste Hindu man or, alternatively, through "utter abandonment of her will to that of her husband" (Burton, 1998, p. 79).

Women were not allowed to study or listen to the *Vedas* or other religious scripts; as such they were denied any possibility of achieving *Moksha* as they could never gain the knowledge that was paramount to earning the status that offered the liberating spiritual freedom from the cycles of life. Ramabai herself was reluctant to read the prohibited *Vedas* until she was not only encouraged, but challenged to do so by the progressive social reformer Keshub Chunder Sen. She studied both the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* (Tharu & Lalita, 1991), lamenting the fact of the very obvious link between caste and sex on which the isolating culture of women's exclusion was practiced and maintained. "My eyes were being gradually opened; I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was

[49] The spiritual freedom and eternal bliss achieved through liberation from the eternal life cycle consisting of birth, suffering, death and reincarnation; according to the Hindu scriptures; also known as Nirvana, in Buddhism.

becoming clearer and clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religion was concerned" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 80).

By this time, Ramabai had joined the circle of social reformers, travelling widely addressing women on the need for education and emancipation within the privacy of their homes and secluded spaces. She presented her arguments to her apprentices by offering numerous examples of mythological figures of educated, independent women; active and strong in confronting and overcoming the challenges that life had laid before them. She emphasized to her protégés their right to freedom and dignity while also making the same arguments in the general meetings that were organised. As such, by the age of 20, Ramabai had already launched her career as an active, independent woman educator (Kosambi, 1998). A short while after their arrival in Calcutta, Ramabai lost her brother, her last surviving relative. Six months after Shrinivas' death, she married a close friend of his, Bipen Behari Das Medhavi, an educated, self-made Bengali lawyer from the *Shudra*[50] caste who she had known for two years. As an upper caste Brahmin, Ramabai's marriage to Bipen Behari Das Medhavi was forbidden according to Hindu law. As such, they were united in a civil court registration marriage in June, 1880 (Kosambi, 1998).

[50] Shudras are the lowest category according to the Hindu caste system, apart from the untouchables.

Ramabai's increasing deception with Hinduism and loss of religious faith, which in turn led to her augmenting interest in Christianity, are evident from entries in her autobiography such as,

> I became quite dissatisfied with myself, I wanted something more than the Shastras could give me, but I did not know what it was that I wanted. […] lost all faith in the religion of our ancestors […] neither my husband nor I believed in the Hindu religion (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 80).

In 1881, one year after her marriage, at the age of twenty three, Pandita Ramabai gave birth to her daughter Manorama. As luck would have it, a year later, in 1882 her husband died of cholera leaving the 24 year old Ramabai widowed and penniless, alone with her one year old daughter (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). After their marriage Ramabai and her husband had settled in Silchar, Assam, in North Eastern India. This is where she received her first formal initiation into Christianity through the tutelage of Isaac Allen, a Baptist missionary. According to her autobiography, her husband had not been encouraging towards her interest in what he considered as the "despised Christian community" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 80). What might have occurred had she not been widowed would be pure speculation; however, what is clear is that Medhavi's demise permitted Ramabai to pursue her quest for "something better" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 80) without the reservations or restrictions she might have faced had he been alive.

By this time, Ramabai's reputation as the erudite Sanskrit scholar, and champion of women's education had spread far and wide. Social reformers in Maharashtra were going to great lengths, in the words of Meera Kosambi, to "reclaim their 'native daughter'" (Kosambi, 1998, p. 196), to help further their cause. Soon after, in 1882, Ramabai arrived in Pune, Maharashtra which was the main headquarters of social reform activity, and had also been the site of controversy regarding women's questions, in particular the issue of widow remarriage, since the 1860s. She joined forces with local social reformers, soon after establishing the *Arya Mahila Samaj (AMS) Women's Association* with the aim to promote awareness and education for women. Branches of the association were established in other major cities of the region. She also began working with the *Society for the Promotion of Widow Remarriage*, which had been established in 1886. However, her intent to set up a home for widows in Pune received little support. Although Ramabai was welcomed by many social reformers, she also met with much criticism from conservative Hindus. Her position as a highly educated widowed woman who dared to read the sacred texts proved to be a bitter pill for many of those steeped in the late nineteenth century Hindu traditions (Burton, 1998).

While in Pune, alongside a growing conviction to study medicine, Ramabai also became convinced of the necessity to learn the English language; she approached members of the Anglo-Catholic Community of St. Mary the Virgin, whose main centre was at Wantatge in Oxfordshire, and started receiving lessons

from Miss Hurford, a mission staff (Burton, 1998); (Forbes, 1996). By the end of June 1882, she also published her first book in the Marathi language titled *Stri Dharma Neeti – Morals for Women* – (Forbes, 1996, p. 46), aimed to encourage women to take control of their own lives; although Meera Kosambi has also stated that the book was rather patronising, "[…] with the objective of counselling the 'helpless and lacking in knowledge' women 'in our unfortunate country'" (Kosambi, 1998, p. 196).

During this period, as an expert on women's education, Ramabai was invited to offer evidence before the Hunter Commission on Education. She emphasised the urgent need for women doctors as Indian women would not be attended by male doctors, especially when dealing with gynaecological and obstetric issues. She also stressed the need for women teachers and school inspectors, while also highlighting the largely generalised attitude of public suspicion and hostility towards women's education. Sir William Hunter was highly impressed by the detail and thoroughness of her report and had it translated from Marathi to English, making public in England her suggestions regarding the dire need for female medical training and women doctors. The publication of Ramabai's report was partially responsible for the formation of the *Countess*

Dufferin Fund [51] to provide female medical assistance to Indian women (Kosambi, 1998).

At this point, amid much protest and discouragement from both well-wishers and critics, Ramabai took the decision to travel to England to study medicine. Before the mid-1880s there were no options in India for women to study and embark on a medical career. Using revenue from the sales of her first publication, *Stri Dharma Neeti*, as well as some financial assistance from the Anglo-Catholic Community of St. Mary the Virgin, – who had previously helped her to begin learning English, – she was able to receive support and help with accommodation arrangements in Wantage, where the Community's headquarters was located in England (Forbes, 1996). In April 1883, Ramabai set sail for England, accompanied by her young daughter, Manorama and close friend, Anandibai Bhagat who had planned to study a teacher training course. They arrived in England well and in good health and spirits, according to the records, soon settling down in Wantage. However, a few months later, Anandibai committed suicide, leaving Ramabai extremely shaken and upset. Adding to this misfortune, she was also diagnosed with a hearing defect that prevented her from being able to study medicine. Geraldine Forbes states that there are no clear records as to the possible causes or triggers of the incidence of her friend's

[51] Officially: *The National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India.*

suicide, but she highlights the fact that by at the age of barely 25 years, Pandita Ramabai had witnessed the death of both her parents, her elder sister and brother, her young husband and closest friend (Forbes, 1996).

Forbes states that soon after her arrival in England, Ramabai decided to convert alongside her daughter to Christianity and accept baptism; suggesting that the untimely death of her closest friend might have contributed to her taking the decision. She had, before her trip, apparently made it clear to the missionaries both in India and, on her arrival, in England, that she was not willing to convert to Christianity (Forbes, 1996). As such, her sudden decision was a major shock to all but especially to the communities in India, causing a storm and earning her severe criticism from many reformers who were to accuse her of "nationwide missionary designs" (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 84). She was baptised as Mary Rama and historians have speculated regarding whether Ramabai's conversion was as a result of her friend's death or due to the attitudes of kindness and selfless support she witnessed amongst the sisters of *Wantage* for underprivileged and working-class women. Possible both of these factors as well as others were relevant; in any case, her conversion to Christianity was seen as a betrayal by many of her former supporters, while the missionaries were "delighted to have this learned, "high-caste" woman as a convert" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 245).

Ramabai was by no means free of controversy as a converted Christian. She was placed for spiritual guidance under the elderly Sister Geraldine of the Anglo-Catholic Community of St. Mary the Virgin, who was known to have been

a "dogmatic disciplinarian" (Kosambi, 1998, p. 197); and was by her own accounts ill equipped to guide Pandita Ramabai.

> First I would say that intellectually I was not equipped for such a work as instructing Ramabai. Though I read a good deal of Hindu literature at that time and it doubtless enlarged my mind, yet neither my natural gifts nor my educational advantages would have fitted me for the work. This was why it was decided to send her to Cheltenham Ladies' College, that she might have the advantage of instruction by women of the highest education and culture (Sister Geraldine, as cited in A.B. Shah, p. 27).

Numerous differences and doctrine disputes were to surface between her Christian mentors, Ramabai, Sister Geraldine and the church authorities. Ramabai refused to concede to the belief in the divinity of Christ or to miracles such as the resurrection of Christ or the Immaculate Conception. These differences and her independence of thought resulted in many prolonged and clearly painful debates with Sister Geraldine in particular. In one of her letters to the Sister, dated 12th May 1885, Ramabai writes

> I am, it is true, a member of the Church of Christ but I am not bound to accept every word that falls from the lips of priests or bishops […] Obedience to the word of God is quite different from perfect obedience to priests only. I have just, with great effort, freed myself from the yolk [sic] of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself

> under another similar yoke by accepting everything which comes from the priests as authorized command of the Most High (Shah A. B., 1977, p. 20).

The conflicts regarding what Ramabai hoped to achieve and the agendas of the Sisters of Wantage earned Ramabai much criticism to the point where she was often accused of arrogance and lacking in faith; accusations that were also tinged with suspicious elements of "strong racial and cultural prejudice" (Kosambi, 1998). The complexity of management and difficulties that Ramabai had to deal with as a result of the disputes caused by her unwillingness to be indoctrinated are recorded in her correspondence over a period of thirty years which was compiled by Sister Geraldine herself and edited into an accessible scholarly format by A. B Shah, in 1977. As the compilation demonstrates, over the years, Sister Geraldine, – whom in her letters, Ramabai affectionately addressed as Dear Old Ajeebai – and Ramabai were to maintain a continuous flow of "virtually uninterrupted" correspondence even during the periods of major religious disputes (Shah A. B., 1977).

The letters between Pandita Ramabai and the missionary sisters are simultaneously proof of their immense differences, the genuine concern and profound love that sustained them, as well as documented evidence of ingrained social relations rhetoric in the language of colonial theology; showing how personal, including "sisterly" relationships were invariably shaped by imperial

power doctrines (Burton, 1998, p. 85). In the numerous letters to Dorothea Bale, the criticism and incomprehension which Ramabai endured are clearly visible.

> One sees with great regret how much her character has deteriorated of late. I should think at one time she was an exception to the generality of the Hindoos [sic]; truthfulness was one of the traits of character in which she was an exception to the generality of her countrywomen; but she has both, in word and in letter, proved that she can no longer be accredited with this virtue, and her great lack of this makes one feel that there is great difficulty in the way of a true conversion. There is, however, much that is noble in her character and we must hope even, in spite of much which seems to belie hope that she will one day come to accept the Truth in its fullness (as cited in A.B. Sharma, p. 94).

In another correspondence, Sister Geraldine justifies why Ramabai was not allowed to start lessons with a prospective pupil, making short shrift to Ramabai's obvious disappointment over the prohibition due to the disapproval by Bishops in India. Sister Geraldine expresses her criticism of Ramabai's independent attitude with the following;

> With regard to Ramabai's disappointment, I cannot see a wholesome lesson to her just now. She has to learn that as a Christian, she is bound to accept the authority of those over her in the Church. She is a little inclined to take too, independent a line, and though this is but a temporal matter, yet she

> should be wiling [sic] even in this, to accept the opinion of those, who from their position in India and from their experience had a right to speak. If you could make this an occasion of giving her a little teaching on submission to authority, I think, the disappointment would not be without fruit to her (as cited in A.B. Sharma, p. 53).

Evident from the compilation of letters was Ramabai's rapidly developing fluency in English and also the warmer rapport she established with Dorothea Beale, the founder and principal of Cheltenham collage where she had finally enrolled for studies in English and Science. Meanwhile, Ramabai continued to thwart the efforts being made to rigidly shape her spiritual direction as per Sister Geraldine, and even Dorothea Beale,[52] who, with her more progressive and moderately feminist outlook, was in a better position than most of the Anglican nuns to recognise and appreciate Ramabai's "wonderful mind and character" (Kosambi, 1998, p. 197).

Ramabai continued to read avidly and widely, dipping deep into theological nineteenth century literature, from Rammohan Roy to Max Muller and Canon

[52] See Antoinette Burton's analysis of the contest of authority between Sister Geraldine, Dorothea Beale and the patriarchal institutions under which they functioned, in the attempt to shape Ramabai's religious and spiritual education, as well as her work in India.

Westcott. Antoinette Burton asserts that the triangular correspondence between Ramabai, Sister Geraldine and Dorothea Beale bears witness to “Ramabai's contest of the colonial mission project […] the ways in which colonialism could and did bring colonizers into conflict with each other as well” (Burton, 1998, p. 88). As far as Dorothea Beale, Sister Geraldine, and the Bishops of Bombay and Lahore were concerned, Ramabai had a key role to play in the “massive missionary endeavour” (Hobsbawm, 1987, p. 71) of the late nineteenth century and “they were extremely anxious to prevent Ramabai's religious "wanderings" from endangering her evangelical potential in the mission field” (Burton, 1998, p. 90). Accordingly, the principle plans being elaborated for Ramabai were that she “be schooled in the correct forms of Christianity” (Burton, 1998, p. 89) so as to fulfill her role as “a soldier in the vast missionary army that advanced the spread of Christianity in Britain's empire” (Burton, 1998, p. 89). Concerns on the part of the Anglican Sisters, the Bishops and the *Patriarchal Missionary Endeavour* in general, that Ramabai’s “mission” could be put at risk by her “undisciplined and rebellious” character abounded.

Ramabai’s prolonged stay in England was considered risky as was her desire to lecture in public. Public meetings held by English women at the time were loaded with “radical political meanings” (Burton, 1998, p. 90) inappropriate and conflictive with the Christian Missionary concerns. Equally, the idea that Ramabai’s direct access to the masses of Indian women would be jeopardised by scandal should she become a visible public figure led to serious attempts to

restrict her access to the public she sought while in England. As an “authentic” Indian woman, the direct and personal access that Ramabai had to the masses of women in India was seen as invaluable for the propagation of the missionary ideology. As such, correspondences with messages such as "we must be careful not to advertise her, or to make too much of her in 'public' . . . it would not be well for her to have anything to do with any but her own sex” (Burton, 1998, p. 91) flooded back and forth. As Antoinette Burton asserts

> Eager to mould Ramabai into the most efficient instrument for evangelization possible, the Anglican hierarchy invoked the practices of purdah as they understood them as justification for secluding Ramabai from the public eye in England. Contamination of Ramabai by public exposure to mixed audiences would, it was believed, endanger her special access to Indian women—access not afforded to either male or female British missionaries nor even to male Indian converts. The prohibitions placed on her lecturing in public may well have been intended to discipline a wilful [sic] convert, but they were also part of a set of strategies designed to maximize evangelical success. Furthermore, by dictating the terms of her experience in England, the bishops were intending to shape the methods of her future work in India (Burton, 1998, p. 91) .

As far as Ramabai was concerned, the attempts at controlling her movements were clear interferences with her personal liberty. She was offended

by suggestions that English bishops were more in tune with the India question than she was and that she should as such "submit to their judgement" (Burton, 1998, p. 91). Her response to Sister Geraldine was that such an argument

> is plainly saying no less than that the people who are not of that country know India and its people far better than I do, who am born and brought up in it and that you or rather the people who are your advisors, do not trust me and my honour, that they have the authority to decide anything for me, and that I ought not to have a voice of my own to say anything against that decision … (As cited in Burton, 1998, p. 92)

In further letters that were sent between Sister Geraldine and Pandita Ramabai, she reiterated her position as someone who understood and cared for India and its population perfectly; informing her also of the fact that on the invitation of numerous learned pundits, she had given lectures to both men and mixed audiences. As such, as far as Ramabai was concerned, there was absolutely no risk of damage to either her reputation or person to being seen amongst men, women or both; be it in England, India or anywhere else. Ramabai also made clear the fact that she would not succumb to attempts or interferences with her plans on how to shape and define her reform work in India (Burton, 1998); (Shah A. B., 1977). Regarding the questions around the appropriateness of her as an Indian woman and widow, lecturing young men, she responded,

> I am anxious to do away with all kinds of prejudices which deprive a woman in India of her proper place in society […]. Can I confine my work only to women in India and have nothing to do with men? I do not think so. To help women to come forward in the society I must first of all . . . teach men of poorer classes. Then when men arc [sic] convinced of the necessity of elevating the condition of their women, I shall have access to their Zenanas. Unless I begin to have regular and pure intercourse with men, I shall in vain hope and try to help my countrywomen (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 92).

Burton goes on to assert that it is unquestionable that Ramabai's concerns and vision of social reform were secular and non-evangelical, contrasting absolutely with the "gender-specific, gender-targeted evangelical strategies articulated by the Anglican bishops—strategies that in fact underpinned the entire ideological apparatus of evangelization in the nineteenth century (Burton, 1998, p. 92). Ramabai herself understood clearly that the debate over her public appearances was directly related to the struggle in defining the conditions of Indian women's emancipation, just as it was also directly connected to her personal battle for identity and self-determination in her role as social reformer in India. Burton asserts that in their role as keepers of Ramabai's reputation, through the control of her movements in varied and intrusive manners, the English missionaries who were involved with her since her arrival in the country were

basically fulfilling their particular preoccupations. The efforts made to restrict and control her movements caused Ramabai particular distress, accustomed as she was to travelling freely and widely, and especially because she had never encountered similar limitations from he own family and relatives. She was also sensitive to the importance of decorum, especially on the part of women, as outlined in her first publication *Stri Dharma Neeti*. Ramabai expressed her rejection of the attempts to control her mobility and public appearances, using the opportunity to directly challenge the patriarchal authority that the church and its representatives attempted to wield over her.

> It seems to me that you are advising me . . . to accept the will of those who have authority, etc. This however I cannot accept. I have a conscience, a mind and judgment of my own, I must think [for] myself and so [do] everything which GOD has given me the power of doing… (as cited in Burton, 1998, p. 94).

Burton highlights how as a converted Christian under colonial rule, Pandita Ramabai in fact instructed the Christian establishment about the particular complexities and difficulties of being in her position, while also disclosing the inherent role played by the Anglican hierarchy in maintaining the imperial power structures through the disciplining of converts such as herself. Her conversion had effectively made her into a permanent outcast from Hindu communities – as was made clear by the uproar and loss of support, even from previously loyal

reformists, that she suffered back in India when the news was published – and consequently, she remained a permanently defiant "subject of colonial Christian authority" (Burton, 1998, p. 95). Ramabai's defiance represented her refusal to being frozen in the area between British imperial power and colonial Christianity, while also highlighting her intense awareness of the challenges her position posed for colonial reformers; not simply in the areas of imperial Christian authority and gender relations, but also as regards the inherent convictions of Indian racial and cultural inferiority, and how these might define the colonial encounter in Britain.

The exchanges in many of the letters in the compilation by Sister Geraldine and A. B. Shah bear witness to the fact that Pandita Ramabai's position was highly disruptive for her Christian saviours as she rocked the "natural order of subordination of native wilfulness to English wisdom […] of native Christians to British ecclesiastical authority, […] potentially of the Anglican sisters' prescribed submission in clerical matters to the male hierarchy" (Burton, 1998, p. 96). Ramabai's disturbing questioning of whether in following Christianity she would actually be following the teachings of Christ, or in fact of men, posed a challenge to the whole Christian Imperial project. Her conviction that each person's own free will is also guided by God was contradictory to the orthodoxy of the Anglican teachings. Through her questions and rejection of orthodoxy in both Hinduism and Christianism, she demonstrated her awareness of the coercive nature of orthodoxy and in this case the Anglican orthodoxy's agenda for civilising India. As such, as Antoinette Burton states,

> Ramabai did not merely question the rationale for Britain's imperial presence; her critique was much more radical than that. By articulating resistance to the authority of the church in matters doctrinal and matters Indian, she pointed to the orientalist basis of the church's social mission. And, by demonstrating that she was not prepared to work within its parameters, she contested the church's claim to exercise a monopoly on evangelical and social reform strategies in India. Pandita Ramabai recognized that, in the struggle for reform in India, evangelical orthodoxy was a metaphor for imperial authority. Her "apostasy" was, in a very real sense, the grounds for constructing an alternative female reform consciousness in the context of late-nineteenth-century imperial Britain (Burton, 1998, p. 105).

In March 1886, amidst much uncertainty as to her future plans, Pandita Ramabai received an invitation to travel to the USA; on the occasion of her cousin, Anandibai Joshee's graduation in medicine, from the *Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania* (WMCP) in Philadelphia. Anandibai Joshee was the first Indian woman to qualify as a doctor (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). In order to finance her trip to the USA, Pandita Ramabai wrote her second book titled *The High Cast Hindu Woman* (Forbes, 1996). The book has been defined as "Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's most publicized critique of women's subordination" (Rosalind O' Hanlon, as cited in Haynes & Prakash, 1991, p. 105). Ten thousand copies of the

book sold before Ramabai had even set out on her trip to the United States (Forbes, 1996). As Meera Kosambi asserts, Ramabai's visit to Philadelphia marked a turning point in her career as an educationist and a missionary.

Going on the visit meant once again rebelling against her guardians, the Sisters' wishes, but the visit brought her huge media attention in New York, Boston and elsewhere and placed her in the centre of Philadelphia's public life. She had been invited by Professor Rachel Bodley, the Dean of WMCP, as an honoured guest at Anandibai Joshee's graduation, and to speak for a special event the following day. Ramabai carried out in-depth research into the systems of schooling in Philadelphia, with the intention of applying similar principles to opening a boarding school for widows in India. She also campaigned and publicised the issues of Indian women's oppression, highlighting especially the cases of widows.

In 1887, the *American Ramabai Association* was set up by admirers in Boston, to support the work she intended to do in India. A subsidiary Association was opened up in San Francisco sometime later. The Associations pledged to give financial support during a period of 10 years towards the establishment of a secular residential school for widows. Meanwhile, Pandita Ramabai travelled all over the USA and Canada, visiting women's organisations and important personalities of the epoch. She visited educational institutes, philanthropic and charitable organisations, while also giving public lectures. By May 1888, she had gathered the hugely unprecedented amount of over $30,000, through her

Association, her lectures and the publication of *The High-caste Hindu woman*, (Forbes, 1996)*;* (Kosambi, 1998)

In February 1889, Pandita Ramabai returned to India to establish, amidst great publicity, the first school for widows called *Sharada Sadan*, as in 'Home of Wisdom'. There are discrepancies amongst scholars regarding the reception and circumstances around the establishment of *Sharada Sadan* and its future. Meera Kosambi asserts that both the school and Ramabai received the complete support of the social reformers of the period

> […] who were impressed not only with her ability single-handedly to raise generous funds abroad but also with her continued devotion to Indian social reform. The fact that her Christian conversion had not 'denationalised' her was felt to be reassuring. Even the largely conservative Marathi weekly of Poona, *The Kesari* [53], expressed pride "that such an extraordinary woman was born in our midst", admitting that "Today our society has a great need for women like Pandita Ramabai ... It is to her credit that she has not given up her national pride together with her religion (as cited in Kosambi, 1998, p. 198).

[53] *Kesari*, which translates as 'Lion' in Sanskrit was a nationalist newspaper founded in 1881 by Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the main, orthodox Hindu leaders of the Independence movement.

Certainly, the school was the very first of its kind, a Brahmin women's residential institute, mainly for widows, but it also accepted single girls and day schoolers. Forbes highlights that it was a non-sectarian school where all the different Brahmin caste norms were observed. However, contrary to Meera Kosambi, Geraldine Forbes states that although some high caste Hindu widows attended the school, "the Hindu community remained suspicious of Ramabai's motives" (Forbes, 1996, p. 47). In any case, *Sharada Sadan* provided regular schooling as well as vocational training in teaching and nursing. "It was a radical idea which sought to achieve economic self-reliance for women while providing shelter" (Kosambi, 1998, p. 198). Forbes asserts that the school generated much criticism from orthodox Hindus and Ramabai unsuccessfully "attempted to forestall criticism by forming and Executive Committee composed of reformers who were known as staunch Hindus" (Forbes, 1996, p. 47).

Ramabai's efforts were somewhat futile and less than twelve months after the establishment of *Sharada Sadan*, articles criticising Ramabai and the school began to appear in Bombay newspapers (Forbes, 1996). Financial problems obliged Ramabai to move the school to Pune; however, in Pune she was accused by the newspaper, *Kesari* and others of converting the widows to Christianity as they were allowed to attend her prayer meetings. Consequently, by 1893 many widows and girls were taken out of the school. However, despite these setbacks, by 1900, *Sharada Sadan* had trained eighty women as nurses or teachers, thus

providing them with the possibility of earning a living on their own (Forbes, 1996).

The regular clashes between conservative attackers of Ramabai's endeavours and reformist supporters, each through their own press medias, led to countless scandals, the resignation of the local Advisory Committee, as well as dwindling all round support from reformers. This resulted in a major financial crisis and Ramabai's complete marginalisation from the mainstream Hindu society. In 1899 Ramabai either moved the original school or set up a second school in the village of Kedgaon, thirty miles outside Pune (Forbes, 1996); (Kosambi, 1998). The period coincided with the widespread famine in Western and Central India which began in 1897; leaving numerous women and children as victims with nowhere to turn. Ramabai and her family had suffered another such famine during her childhood, and she was quick to take action in trying to alleviate the disaster for hundreds of women and children. They found refuge in *Sharada Sadan*, where she fed, clothed and enrolled them to study.

Ramabai was accused by the conservatives, – especially well known amongst them was the notorious anti-reformer nationalist, BG Tilak – of taking advantage of the famine to forward her cause of spreading Christianity. He dismissed the women who sought refuge in *Sharada Sadan* as "widows caught in Ramabai's net during the unique opportunity of the famine years" (Kosambi, 1998, p. 199). The negative publicity and criticism towards Pandita Ramabai by orthodox men who were also involved in government resulted in the city

magistrate of Pune officially limiting the number of women who could be boarded in *Sharada Sadan*. In response, Ramabai took the famine victims to Kedgaon, where she had set up the second version of *Sharada Sadan* which came to be known as *Ramabai Mukti Mission*, as in salvation. *Mukti* was established within the grounds of 100 acres of land, which Ramabai had previously purchased (Forbes, 1996).

By the 1900s, *Mukti* had become a major establishment housing 2,000 women and children who attended school and received training for various professions (Forbes, 1996). The premises were divided into different sections, "the original Hindu Widows' Home, a Home for Christian Women, a 'Rescue Home' for sexually victimised women, a separate section for old women and one for blind women (Kosambi, 1988). *Mukti* was financed by an American committee "which willingly approved all her schemes" (Forbes, 1996, p. 48). Freed from commitment to Hindu sponsors, Ramabai encouraged the women under her care to embrace her version of Christianity and developed a tailor made educational program suited to their requirements. Pandita Ramabai's

> […] version of Christianity was eclectic, combining ideas she had learned from the sisters at Wantage, and from Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Indian Christian friends. Ramabai saw caste as the great flaw in Hindu society. It led to false valuing of the intellect and denigration of physical work. Caste associations promoted narrow self-interest and inhibited the development of a democratic spirit (Forbes, 1996, p. 48).

Pandita Ramabai's educational curriculum was designed to cure the wounds inflicted by thousands of years of abuse and also to foment a new spirit of society based on humane and egalitarian principles of kindness, growth and respect. The curriculum she designed included literature that was specifically chosen for content that placed high value and emphasise on moral models which would naturally foster a spirit of kindness and caring. Students were taught to understand and value their bodies and the physical world around them through subjects that covered physiology and botany. Practical training to acquire capacity and skills in industrial areas such as printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood-cutting, weaving, needlework as well as farming and gardening were also imparted. Students were obliged to join and form groups such as the *Temperance Union* or the *Christian Endeavour Society* (Forbes, 1996, p. 48), as a way of abolishing traditional caste differences and obstacles, as well as promoting the development of groupings based on friendships and common interests. Within these groups children also learnt how to be independent and autonomous, and fend for themselves; "Simple parliamentary rules were encouraged to take charge of their own affairs" (Forbes, 1996, p. 48).

Although Pandita Ramabai's educational program and work gained her much respect and admiration, as Kosambi stated, her conversion to Christianity led to her most valuable contribution to women's education being largely ignored and obscured by relegation to the back of documented history, until relatively

recently, (Kosambi, 1988). During a period in history when there was growing hatred towards British occupation Ramabai's work and position as an acknowledged Christian profoundly incensed "some of the most powerful men in western India" (Forbes, 1996, p. 49). Ramabai herself was convinced that the intensity of the anger felt by these men was because many of her protégées were high caste women. She states that had her work only involved lower caste women, it would never have resulted in such venomous vitriol from these autocratic patriarchs (Forbes, 1996).

Her clearly valid opinion was the result of the countless cases of inhumane cruelty and abuse towards upper-caste Brahmin child brides and widows she had witnessed. In one particular case, a young child bride Rukhmabai was tried and sentenced to jail for refusing to have a conjugal relationship with her husband. In response to the verdict Ramabai wrote:

> Our only wonder is that a defenceless woman like Rukhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British Government, the 129,000,000 men, the 330,000,000 gods of the Hindus; all these have conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English Government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 49).

Pandita Ramabai was awarded the *Kaiser-e-Hind* gold medal[54] in 1919; however, her health was failing and she was unable to travel to Bombay to receive the award personally. The *Mukti Mission* was continued by her daughter Manorama, who established similar centres in other parts of India. Manorama was a well-educated, devout and adept assistant to her mother; however, her health failed her and she passed away in 1921, at the age of 40. Pandita Ramabai suffered Manorama's death, which turned out to be the last of her personal losses. Bearing the tragedy characteristically; she herself died a year later "at the age of 64, as copies of her magnum opus, the Marathi translation of the Bible, were rolling off the *Mukti Mission's* printing press, run by her own specially trained girls (Kosambi, 1988, p. 200). Geraldine Forbes asserts that "Ramabai's greatest legacy was her effort, the first in India, to educate widows and the pupils she left behind to carry on her work", (Forbes, 1996, p. 49). Her concept of education was wholesome and comprehensive, informed from the very beginning by her deep conviction that women needed to be socially aware and active participants in their own self-improvement and progress. Her motto of *Self-Reliance* as an indispensable tool for progress was inculcated into the curriculums of *Sharada Sadan*, *Mukti* Mission and the other centres that were set up by Manorama in later

[54] The *Kaisar-i-Hind Medal* was an award established in the 1900 by Queen Vitoria, in recognition of distinguished service towards the advancement of public interest during the British rule. It was also awarded to Mohandas Gandhi, in 1915.

years. As Meera Kosambi states, "Self-reliance" was her password for progress which ran through the *Stree Dharma Neeti* and formed part of the programme outlined at the end of *The High-caste Hindu Woman* and translated into the organisation of the *Sharada Sadan* and the *Mukti Mission*" (Kosambi, 1988, p. 200).

It is without question that Ramabai's contestation of the prevalent patriarchy through her educational and missionary engagements not only began very early in her childhood but was exceptional in every way. Starting from the moment of her father's resistance of laid down norms, and insistence on her education in Sanskrit, the 'divine language' that was available exclusively for upper-caste men, to her mother's contribution towards her eruditeness; she battled against these patriarchal forces throughout her life. Her achievements were monumental considering how every single endeavour was an uphill battle. In a society that cast women mainly in the roles of mothers and wives, the demand for an education beyond the formation of *good* housewives, mothers and housekeepers was entirely lost. Even women doctors were considered unnecessary as there were obvious needs for midwives, but attending to other women's health related issues were not valued as important. Meera Kosambi states,

> […] even the simple non-professional education for women as discussed by the Hunter Commission was only partially endorsed by the Western-educated conservatives. After recommending some sort of "opening of the mind" and "a habit and inclination to reason", the conservative press

> asserted: In educating our females our first care must be to try to make them good house-wives and good mothers ... If we want our girls to be useful they must learn to read and write, to keep accounts, to sew and above all to cook. These we think can be better taught at home than in a public school. As the "opening of the mind" and the "habit and inclination to reason" was to lead women no further than their wife-mother-housewife role, it was inevitable that Ramabai's insistence on women's education, self-confidence and self-reliance was vehemently opposed (Kosambi, 1988, p. 204).

Pandita Ramabai's unique person and life story was filled with diverse, unprecedented contestations against male supremacy within Hinduism in India as well as Christianity and the Anglican Church. As a Hindu she defied all the laws that maintained women's state of subjugation to male patriarchy and as an Indian convert she challenged the religious premises of the British Bishops and nuns. Ramabai also demonstrated a pioneering capacity to focus on the international perspectives in order to argue her causes. In her travel logs about the USA, written in Marathi and registered under the English title of, *'The Peoples of the United States, 1889'* (Bagchi, 2010), she discusses the contributions towards the advancement of women by the British feminists, Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft. She also offers what is a truly powerful and pioneering documentation of the initiatives and organisation of nineteenth century North

American women into associations and societies, so as to effectively further education and social welfare for women.

Pandita Ramabai fought against the orthodox, autocratic oppression of Hindu women, especially the high-caste Brahmin women who were particularly affected by Hindu doctrines, and pioneered the initiation of an educational system for women that represented a sincere move towards authentic empowerment and emancipation from patriarchal forces. In many instances, her efforts earned her the worst type of condemnation from the orthodox Hindu community. She suffered a very high price for challenging the imposed religious, cultural and social hegemony of orthodox Hinduism, and to a certain extent, also the Anglican Church. Pandita Ramabai has, until relatively recently, been completely wiped out from the history books and records of Western India. Meera Kosambi states,

> […] she was marginalised both during her lifetime and the subsequent 'gatekeeping of history' in retaliation for her dual interrogation of Hinduism and patriarchy. […] So complete was her 'erasure' from the history of Western India that it is only now, three-quarters of a century after her death, that we are beginning to make a fresh appraisal of the extent of her 'transgressions' and contestations, as well as their price, and to reclaim her manifold contribution to the cause of Indian women (Kosambi, 1988, p. 205).

As Meera Kosambi further asserts, Pandita Ramabai's demise was a "tragic loss in more ways than has been realised in terms of her achievements" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 287). As an extraordinarily singular and incessant crusader, she remains to date unmatched in Maharashtrian society; in terms of her involvement in gender reform policies spanning the scale and diversity of her legacy. Kosambi asserts that Ramabai's combination of contradictory positions as a Brahmin Hindu, converted Christian, her "insider's sympathy and an outsider's critique, attempts to reform a society but only by recasting its religious base, the urge to contest and need to be accepted" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 287) were issues of increasingly problematic characteristics which resulted in her native Maharashtra being unable or unwilling to accept or forget her.

Pandita Ramabai led an unparalleled life of courageous contestations of diverse and varied social and religious questions that were and continue to be pertinent to the creation of even a semblance of egalitarian reality in Indian societies. In Kosambi's words, she addressed the issues of

> […] a woman against male hegemony in Hindu society, that of an Indian female convert against the racial-cultural and patriarchal dominance of the Anglican Church, that of an Indian Christian missionary (in both the convert and overt phases of evangelization) against the colonial oppression of Indians, (Kosambi, 2016, p. 287).

The above narratives were offset by her numerous connections both inside and outside India. The complexity, contradictory viewings and greatness of Pandita Ramabai's legacy are visible through the obituaries on her death which reflect, as Meera Kosambi states, "the binary lenses through which she was viewed during the last years of her life and beyond" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 287). Sadly, Ramabai's conversion to Christianity, for many, apparently eclipsed her achievements; generating unabating resentment amongst the Maharashtrian society that never seems to have been managed or overcome. The *Kesari* paper founded by B.G. Tilak,[55] the orthodox, conservative Hindu and radical nationalist, wrote in its obituary of Pandita Ramabai the following words.

> Anybody would regret the fact that the capability of such an intelligent, resolute, and highly industrious lady benefited not the Hindu society but foreign Christian missionary organisations. The chief reason why this benefit accrued to foreigners rather than her own people was unarguably the lady's personal ambition…. It must be said that the lady succumbed prematurely to temptation by missionary organisations because of her impatience, before properly ascertaining whether or not her capability had

[55] Tilak was not an upholder of the issue of women's rights and is known to have been highly conservative and strongly opposed to the liberal reforms that sought to address issues such as gender rights and scheduled castes; that is, untouchable castes. See also: (Rao, 2008) and (Jaffrelot, 2005).

> any scope within the Hindu society. Tasks for the uplift of Hindu women, such as female education, can be undertaken while remaining within the Hindu fold, as has been demonstrated by Professor Karve's institutions and the Seva Sadan managed under the leadership pf Mrs. Ramaben-saheb Ranade. Undoubtedly, had Pandita Ramabai taken it seriously, she too could have demonstrated her organisational capacity while remaining a Hindu. But unfortunately, this was not to be, (as cited in Kosambi, 2016, pp. 287-288).

It would seem that the obituary written in *Kesari* continues to be the opinion upheld in Maharashtra; an opinion that conveniently fails to recognise or admit to the immense obstruction and hostility that Pandita Ramabai's campaigns were forced to struggle against in 1882, long before she finally departed for England. *Kesari* equally fails to recognise that it was in fact Pandita Ramabai's actions that preceded and paved the way for D.K. Karve's *Home for Widows*, whose "success depended on their patriarchal underpinnings" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 289). The fact of the matter was that D.K Karve's home was promoted as an alternative and *correct Hindu* option, for widows after orthodox conservatives successful discredited Ramabai's institution, the *Sharada Sadan*.

Karve, like many of the earlier male and female reformers promoted education for girls and widows, – offering free education as a means to delay girls' marriages, – however; he was amongst those who promoted education as a

means of making women better wives, mothers and citizens; not as a means of attaining gender-quality. Meera Kosambi highlights that when Karve was faced with problematic choices, he opted for the conservative and conventional option; demonstrated clearly by the way in which he kept his wife Anandibai, – who he had married despite opposition to her status as a child widow, – away from his Home for Widows, according to Meera Kosambi, fearing that his students' parents would interpret her presence as his advocacy for widow remarriage. "He may have accepted Ramabai's agenda for widows' education but women's empowerment – Ramabai's chief objective – was never his aim. This is precisely why, in addition to the fact that he was a man and thus unchallenged, *Kesari* supported him" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 289).

Kosambi declares that Ramabai Ranade, – who *Kesari* put forward as a woman to emulate in its criticism of Pandita Ramabai – did not aspire towards a leadership position in her career. As the widow of a man who had been a highly respected and admired socialist politician, she held a high status in society and enjoyed "not only social acceptability and respect, but also a wide support structure" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 289). Ranade always tended to deny agency, crediting her husband as the force behind her achievements. As such, although she provided her students with impeccable standards in the *Seva Sadan* woman's society, – in the form of education and training for marketable skills, – she did not combine her educational program with concepts of aspirations towards equality and empowerment for women, (Kosambi, 2016).

It would seem that although there were unquestionably many who acknowledged Pandita Ramabai's unique greatness; – Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900), the British German philologist and Orientalist stated, "I know no greater hero than Keshub Chunder Sen, and no heroine greater than Ramabai; and I am proud to have been allowed to count both among my best friends" (as cited in Kosambi, 2016, p. 290); – yet these voices were consistently drowned out by the apparently unresolvable, uncompromising condemnation of what was interpreted not only as her religious 'betrayal', but also the shunning of the nation as well as Maharashtra's social reforms and reformers through acceptance of the colonial religion and 'collaboration' with the colonial masters. Kosambi asserts that over half a century later, more liberal voices continued to bemoan "her religious conversion as unnecessary" (Kosambi, 2016, p. 289).

In the unique and absolutely brilliant in-depth study, which includes compilations and translations of letters, that the late professor Meera Kosambi (1939-2015), dedicated to Pandita Ramabai; she offers us not only a comprehensive picture of Ramabai, but raises many questions on which to reflect. Amongst them, whether Ramabai, who was a Brahmin widow from a relatively unknown family, would have enjoyed the same support, social acceptance and agency for her endeavours as, for example, Karve or even Ramabai Ranade, who was the widow of a nationally adored figure. As Kosambi questions:

> Would the reformers have given her the freedom and support to exercise initiative in opening homes for 'rescued' or sexually victimised women,

> famine victims, the blind and the aged? Most of all, would her basically patriarchal male supporters have validated and supported her vison of self-reliant women? And if the Christianity that provided the only moral, financial and practical support in her struggle also alienated her totally from the society she sought to reform, can one adequately gauge the terrible mutual loss? (Kosambi, 2016, p. 291).

It would seem that although some South Asian feminists over the last few years have sought to establish Ramabai as the pioneering feminist who inspired future generations of Indian feminists, going as far as to describe her in terms such as, "a true hero and a pioneer feminist" (as cited in Kosambi, 2016, p. 292); the dismal reality is that most Indians, which includes Indian feminists, remain unaware of the scope or calibre of Pandita Ramabai's contributions. Kosambi points out that Pandita Ramabai is frequently confused with Ramabai Ranade, in Maharashtra (Kosambi, 2016).

Recalling the concluding observations in Pandita Ramabai's manifesto, *The High-Caste Hindu Widow,* written in 1887, in which she insists that the emancipation of oppressed women can only be accomplished through education, economic self-reliance and independent accommodation, rings a curiously familiar, echoing bell. One cannot but fail to notice that current feminist activists consistently focus on the same factors as indispensable and fundamental requirements to help improve the situation for vulnerable groups of women. The

need for shelter, income generating skills and education is inevitably prioritised. As Meera Kosambi highlights, “This reinventing of the wheel more than a century later would have been unnecessary had Ramabai’s message been heeded” (Kosambi, 2016, p. 292).

2.1.6 KAIKHUSRAU JAHAN (1858-1930), RASHID JAHAN (1905-1952) AND OTHERS

Kaikhusrau Jahan (1858-1930), known as (Queen) Begum of Bhopal and also as Sultan Kaikhusrau Jahan, was a progressive woman leader within the social feminism movement of the early 1900s. She was ruler of the state of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, from 1901 to 1926, and the last ruler in four generations of Muslim woman rulers in Bhopal, spanning 1819 to 1926. See: (2.1.6) FIGURE - 31.

Bhopal was the second largest Muslim state in India at the time and all four Muslim women rulers had to skilfully manoeuvre and contend also with the Hindu populous within Bhopal (The Friday Times, 2018). Kaikhusrau Jahan established various educational institutions for girls while also introducing free compulsory primary education. According to Elisabeth Armstrong and The Friday Times, Begum Kaikhusrau Jahan invested in expanding agriculture as well as public health improvement programs. She established improved sanitary facilities and provided public health access for the general population as well as widespread inoculation programmes, (Armstrong, 2017).

Through the social reformist feminism movement, more and more women from the elite classes began to have access to education and in turn joined forces in the effort; making themselves visible and offering their support towards social reform campaigns. The campaigns managed in the best and most progressive case

scenarios to cross culturally span Muslim, Hindu and Cristian communities; despite the typical religious limitations and constraints within which these efforts had to be contained.

(2.1.6) FIGURE - 31 A, B & C

A – Dr John William Tyler, (15th January 1887). *Sultan Kaikhusrau Jahan, Sultan of Bhopal* / *H.H. The Sultan of Bhopal* [Indian Chiefs, 1887: 01/0162], (c.1887). [Albumen print], 13.5 x 9.7 cm. From an album of photographs given to Queen Victoria by. Courtesy of the Royal Collection Trust.
Retrieved from: https://www.rct.uk/collection/2107592/sultan-kaikhusrau-jahan-sultan-of-bhopal-1858-1930

B – Louis Rousselet, (1877). *Sultan Shah Jahan*, (1872) (*Begum of Bhopal*). Detail from photograph - L'Inde des Rajahs (Pub. 1877), Librairie Hachette et cie, Paris, (June 1867). Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sultan_Shah_Jahan,_1872_(Begum_of_Bhopal).jpg

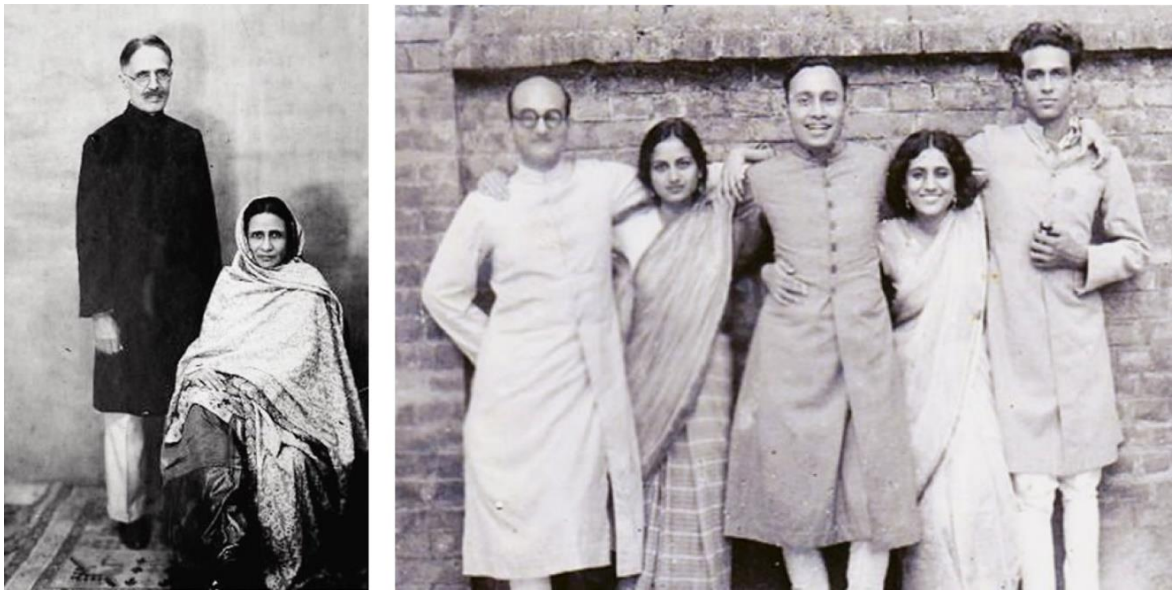
C –*Begum of the Jehan Numa Palace*, Bhopal. This photograph, located in the palace does not specify which of the Begums who ruled between 1819 and 1926 is portrayed. However, we could assume from the quality and type of print as well as the image itself that this is also a photograph of Kaikhusrau Jahan. Further details regarding dates or more are not available. Retrieved from: https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/a-peek-behind-the-veil/

The results of these initial educational programs were paramount in the making of such figures as the activist doctor and writer Rashid Jahan (1905-1952), whose father Sheikh Abdullah was also amongst the great pioneers who fought to establish education for women. See: (2.1.6) FIGURE - 32. Aisha Abbasi states that Sheikh Abdullah worked with his wife Waheeda Begum to establish the first women's school and college in India (Abbasi, 2015).

Rashid Jahan studied in the Woman's College that was established by her father within the currently top ranking *Aligarh Muslim University*; located in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh with offsite campuses spread across India. She went on to become a doctor as well as a literary scholar who "shaped Urdu literature in a feminist direction with their frank portrayal of women's sexuality and desire – memorably in '*Angarey*' [sic] (1930) […]. She was one of the founding members of the *Progressive Writers' Association*", (Armstrong, 2017, p. 3). See: (2.1.6) FIGURE 33

Angaaray which translates as embers or glowing coal was published in 1932 as a co-authored volume by one woman and three men. It is comprised of nine short stories and a play. The authors were Rashid Jahan, Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, and Mahmud-uz-Zafa. See: (2.1.6) FIGURE - 34. Rashid Jahan contributed two stories to the volume which she was ordered to withdraw soon after publication; her contributions were deemed as inadmissible, obscene and

injurious to public sensitivities. The publication of *Angaaray*[56] followed numerous protests and enormous public outcry, seen as it was as an attack on the Muslim religious community and British authorities. It was branded as a "filthy pamphlet" (Bhandare, 2014, p. para. 1); insulting of Muslim religious sensibilities from the point of view of both religion and morality. Rashid Jahan was personally threatened with disfigurement and kidnapping.

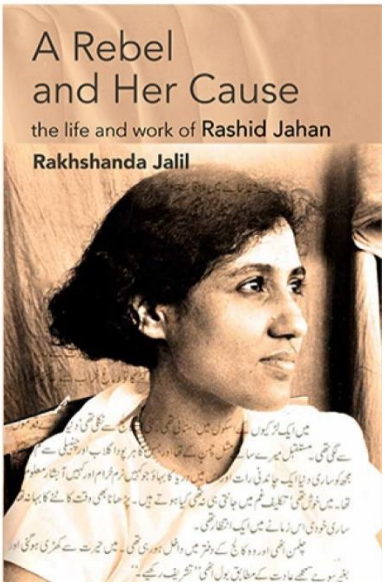


(2.1.6) FIGURE - 32 A & B

A – Sheikh Abdullah and Begum Waheeda Jahan, Rashid Jahan's parents. No further information available. © Rashid Ashraf.
Retrieved from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/rashid_ashraf/24836061167

B – Rashid Jahan (fourth from the left) and her husband, Mahmud-uz-Zafa, (first on the left) with friends or family. No further information available. Retrieved from: https://www.dawn.com/news/1349861

[56] See: https://penguin.co.in/book/fiction/angaaray/



(2.1.6) FIGURE 33 – A, B & C

A – Rashid Jahan. No details of photograph available.
Retrieved from: https://lucknowobserver.com/rashid-jahan/

B – Rashid Jahan. No details of photograph available.
Retrieved from: https://parchamdiary.wordpress.com/2016/02/14/rashid-jahan/

C – *A Rebel and her Cause*, Rakhshanda Jalil, (2014). Rashid Jahan's collected writing, translated from Urdu by Rakhshanda Jalil, (2014).
Retrieved from: https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/a-rebel-and-her-cause-the-life-and-work-of-rashid-jahan/

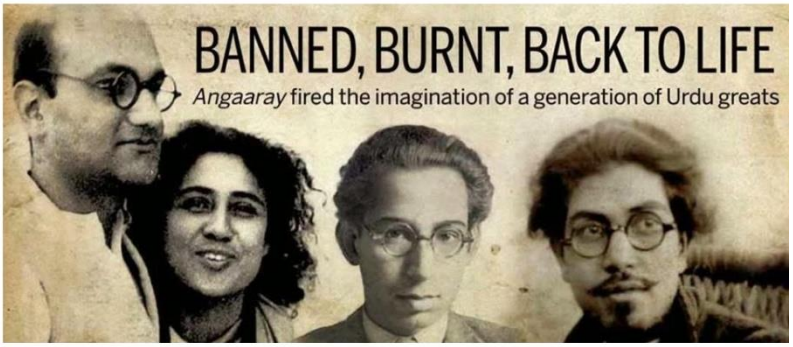
Urged by her friends to hire protection in the form of bodyguards, she refused to do so alleging that this would detract and interfere with her medical practice in the marginalised communities of the city (Gopal, 2009).

"The next three months saw a torrent of abuse and fatwas against the book and its authors", (Jalil, 2017, p. para. 1). In a few months the volumes of the book were burned in protest and it was soon banned by the then British government,

citing section 295A of the Indian Penal Code stating that the book made a "deliberate and malicious intention […] to outrage the religious feelings of […] his majesty's subjects, by words either spoken or written, or by visible representations" (as cited in Gopal, 2009, p. 150). "As a woman, and one who had chosen to write about sexual harassment, birth control, pregnancy, abortion, and women's health, Rashid Jahan […] became the symbol of the cultural violence allegedly perpetrated by the collection of stories. (Gopal, 2009, p. 150).

The Penguin review of the book states the writers of *Angaaray* who had been influenced and inspired by British modernists like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, knowingly sought to challenge the hypocrisy of conservative Islam and British colonialism. *Angaaray* shaped a new generation of writers and the establishment of *The Progressive Writers' Association*. "Translated into English for the first time, *Angaaray* retains the crackling energy and fiery polemic of the original stories. This edition also provides a compelling account of the furore surrounding this explosive collection", (Angaaray, 2014, p. 1).

Nevertheless, as Namita Bhandare states in her review, although *Angaaray* was a manifesto "against social inequity, hypocritical 'maulvis' and the exploitation of women in a deeply patriarchal society" (Bhandare, 2014, p. para.1), Rashid Jahan and her co-authors were not expecting the uproar that was unleashed, they had not meant to shock or scandalise their readers.



(2.1.6) FIGURE - 34 A & B

A – *Angaaray*, (1932). The original cover of the Urdu version. Retrieved from: http://whichbooknext.blogspot.com/2014/06/kims-review-angaaray.html

B – Rashid Jahan and the co-authors of *Angaaray*; Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali and Mahmud-uz-Zafa. Jahan's husband is the first person on the left, (on Jahan's right). Retrieved from: http://whichbooknext.blogspot.com/2014/06/kims-review-angaaray.html

The main aim of the publication of *Angaaray* was to jolt people out of their complacency. In a society where sexual oppression and hypocrisy had become the norm of daily life, the writers attempted to shape a different style of writing that would wake its readers up and pull them out of their conforming pits. It was a "document of disquiet" (Rakhshanda Jalil, as cited in Bhandare, 2014, para.7)[57].

[57] See: A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan Paperback, 2014, by Rakhshanda Jalil.

In the foreword of another translated version of the original, titled in this case *Angarey*, by Vibha S. Chauhan and Khalid Alvi; Saajjad Zahir's daughter, Nadira Babbar states, "*Angarey* was not just a mere collection of short stories but a sophisticated protest against established traditions and conventions. It was a declaration of a path-breaking testament", (Angarey, 2014, p. 4).

Today it is almost impossible to recover the body of literary pieces that Rashid Jahan wrote for magazines and journals; however drafts of short stories and plays recounting the lives of oppressed and subjugated Muslim women from all walks of society have been compounded. Her work and teachings inspired and informed a new and younger generation of well-known writers like Ismat Chughtai, Attia Hosain, Razia Sajjad Zaheer and Sadia Begum Sohravi. In her biography, Rakhshanda Jalil states that Rashid Jahan

> […] was a woman deeply and passionately engaged with the great debates of her age: anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, feminism, nationalism, socialism, gender-justice, and more. […] She joined the Communist Party of India at a time when women were rarely seen or heard of in public life (as cited in Bhandare, 2014, para. 10).

As a gynaecologist and obstetrician working with the poorest of the poor in government hospitals, Rashid Jahan's narratives recount the bare experiences and laments of her patients. Her professional experience provided her with intimate knowledge of every curve, nook, corner and form of the female anatomy. This

knowledge, which shaped her writing, was also a key factor in the uproar and backlash that the publication of *Angaaray* unleashed. In her biography Rakhshanda Jalil states that Rashid Jahan not only paved the way for future women writers but she opened a window of hope and possibilities for future generations of women and Muslim women in particular.

The social reformist feminism movement slowly gained momentum benefiting from the active participation of Hindu, Muslim and Christian men and women from around the country. Names of other social reformers of the period are Mataji Maharani Tapaswani, in Calcutta, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who set up an institution for Muslim girls in Bhagalpur, a small town of Bihar, Sister Subbalakshmi in Madras alongside the Irish feminist Miss Christina Lynch – after marriage – Mrs. Drysdale, Durgaram Mehtaji in Gujarat, Kandukuri Veeresalingam from Andhra Pradesh, Dhondo Keshav Karve alongside his wife, Godubai Joshi, nee Anandibai,[58] Behraji M. Malabari, Jyoti Rao Phule, Gopal

[58] Anandibai was initially a child widow and Pandita Ramabai's first pupil in Sharada Sadan. She later married Dhondo Keshav Karve who authored a biography recounting the personal experiences that led to his building a school for widows. From the moment Anandibai had enrolled in Sharada Sadan, she had dreamt of following in Ramabai's footsteps. As such, according to Geraldine Forbes, "What may well have been the culmination of the life-long dream of two people has been known as *'Karve's Home'* (Forbes, 1996, p. 51)

Ganesh Agarkar, Kahwaja Altaf Hussain Hali and numerous other players who made up the movement that went after change, and championed for women's education. Like Rammohan Roy they were all stout supporters of women's education and many also supported the marriage reform act that supported widow remarriage. (Desai & Thakkar, 2001).

Within the diverse and multiple stances of progressive reform, Pandita Ramabai's position towards women's empowerment was arguably amongst the most pioneering and revolutionary of approaches for numerous years to follow. She was overtly critical of her own society and of the religious doctrines that maintained control over women; as such, she informed the curriculums of her study programmes based on the most progressive philosophies that she found and adapted from the depth of literature and documentation that she consulted. She was ostracized by staunch upper class and caste Hindus and many of her contemporaries, who would not have minded if she had targeted for her reforms exclusively lower class women; however, "upper caste/class families were unwilling to contemplate economic independence for their wives and daughters" (Forbes, 1996, p. 54). In spite of the numerous hurdles that Ramabai was forced to deal with, she could not be persuaded to compromise or depart from her motto which was the education of all women regardless of class, caste or creed for self-reliance and empowerment.

On the other hand, although vouching for progress and change, many of the early men and women reformers who were setting up educational centres

continued to endorse traditional philosophies with curriculums to develop *good* wives, mothers and neighbours. There were instances where the curricular philosophy cannot but be considered as inherently warped. D.D. Karve, for example, considered that unmarried girls should be educated as described previously, to be ideal spouses, mothers and homemakers while widows – who were not expected to be remarried – should be taught to fend for themselves by learning trades that would help them to be economically independent and able to "think for themselves" (Forbes, 1996, p. 52).

In order to appease the fears and criticism from the conservative, religious parents of their pupils, many of the early players of socialist reform designed curriculums for women's institutions that were "dominated by home science and religious lore" (Forbes, 1996, p. 54). In any case, it is of no doubt that all these early efforts were significant and contributed to the first changes towards progressive legislation as well as the birth of the first women's organisations such as the earlier mentioned *Arya Women's Society* (*Arya Mahila Samaj*), to promote women's education and fight against child marriage; established in 1882 by Pandita Ramabai.

Raka Ray asserts that the social reform movement and the struggle for freedom involved the active presence of comparatively more women from the states of Bengal in the east and Maharashtra in the west central regions, than the rest of India. Amongst the women who were particularly active she names Ramabai Ranade and Pandita Ramabai from Maharashtra as well as Swarnakumari

Devi, Kadambini Ganguly and Abala Bose from Bengal; all who were participants in the campaign for women's education and improved conditions for widows. Bengali and Maharashtrian women were also at the forefront of the campaign for female suffrage led by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Margaret Cousins with the founding of the *Women's India Association* in 1917 (Ray R. , 1999); (Ravichandran, 2018). Although the social reform movement was predominantly an upper-class movement dominated by an "educated male intelligentsia" (Ray R. , 1999, p. 36); it was the foundation and predecessor to the creation of independent women's movements that would push specifically for gender related reforms.

The truly progressive minded fathers, husbands and brothers sought to develop a society where women were educated and could take responsibility towards improving the lives of others in need. They were also aware of the patronising colonial attitudes towards Indians and considered that the education of women in Indian society would eradicate the notion of decadence and backwardness as regards Indian people and culture that often predominated in the minds of the western world. These progressive reformists, fully aware of the gifts of wisdom and knowledge, also sought the support and company of educated women to accompany them, both in their private lives and professionally. It is quite feasible that they envisioned, as Geraldine Forbes suggests, that educated women would take charge of social reform issues while they dedicated themselves to politics (Forbes, 1996).

And theirs was a relatively accurate picture of how the reform movement of the period progressed. In a few years, women became increasingly more visible outside their homes and in public spaces. They accompanied their husbands to official civil postings and ceremonies as "carefully groomed English-speaking" (Forbes, 1996, p. 61) wives. *The Indian National Congress* (INC), which was formed in 1885 included women amongst its members. In 1889 ten women participants from Bombay and Bengal attended the fifth INC meeting that was scheduled since its inception. Pandita Ramabai, who was amongst the attendees, associated her commitment to gender issues and women's rights with the national cause of self-governance (Armstrong, 2017).

The system continued to be almost overwhelmingly conservative, producing mainly "professionalised housewives" (Forbes, 1996, p. 61)*;* however, these first generation of educated women wrote about the condition of womanhood and their lives, while the following generations articulated the needs and issues of women, creating a discourse that highlighted not only the necessities of women, but also condemned the wrongdoing, criticising the powers that maintained the status quo including both national and foreign bodies. The process was far from simple, nor was progress achieved on an evenly upward curve. Nevertheless, as a result of the agenda of the social reform movement, towards the end of the 19th century women began to make up a percentage of the graduates coming out of medical and other professional schools and universities. As Partha Chattergee asserts, "the spread of formal education among middle-class women in Bengal in the second half of the

nineteenth century was truly remarkable. From 95 girls schools with an attendance of 2500 in 1863, the figures went up to 2238 schools in 1890 with a total of more than 80,000 students" (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 628).

These women were the women who then founded the *All India Women's Conference* (AIWC) in the 1920s which catered for the more radical reforms that were to follow (Ray R. , 1999). What had been considered unacceptable or deviant behaviour previously became acceptable and even normal. Following the above initiatives, both the first and the second half of the twentieth century were marked by women leaving the privacy of their homes to organise and attend meetings raising more and more questions regarding their rights, condition and position in society. These meetings led to the gradual formation of many other organisations addressing a wide variety of issues that had never previously been contemplated. "[…] by the early years of the twentieth century Indian women were full participants in the redefinition of their futures" (Forbes, 1996, p. 63).

India remains a hugely diverse and unequal society today. Despite over one hundred years since the first emergence of feminism within the initial social reform movement. What is a certainty is that British colonialism and Indian nationalism were a central and foundational "historical fact which Indians have lived and battled with and one within which the story of Indian feminism emerged and grew" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 2). However, one must not mistakenly believe that discrimination towards women was not perceived or understood by Indians before the influence of western principals. As the double volume compilations by

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita demonstrate[59] women's writings from as far back as the 6th century in India are testimonies to a long legacy of what could be interpreted as women's rights discourse. Nevertheless, it is within the western colonial context that injustices towards women began to be perceived as socially induced realities that required the intervention of state reforms within structured legislation.

India has always been made up of societies defined by diversity and inequalities. The different strands of feminism whether social reform, nationalist or others both within British colonialism and following independence have negotiated this diversity, impacting each region according to the differences and nature of each place and community. Thus, as Maitrayee Chaudhuri analyses, Indian feminism necessarily needs to be examined within the contexts of a "colonial social constructionist position" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 4); taking into consideration colonial historical facts, Indian nationalism and later developments within the independent state, right up to the latest transformations induced by globalisation and the increasingly active movements and activism amongst marginalised and socially disadvantaged communities such as the Dalits.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri also draws attention to questions raised about whether colonial intervention in the socialist reform movements were not in fact less about

[59] See: (Tharu & Lalita, 1991)

women and more about reconfiguring tradition and culture; in for example, the abolition of *Sati* Act in 1829, or the *Age of Consent for Women Bill* passed in 1863, which in an attempt to combat child marriage criminalised sexual intercourse with a girl younger than 10 years as rape.

> […] we have arguments that suggest social reforms were more about efforts to introduce new patriarchies than about women's rights and gender justice. Such rethinking emerges from the challenges posed by social movements and new theorizing emanating from structural transformations within the country (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 14).

Incidentally, further efforts to rise the age from 10 years in following years have been met with heated debate regarding the questions of *community rights* versus *state rights*. For educated academics this must clearly be a non-debatable question requiring the obligatory elimination of so called community rights. However, despite the *Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929,* which set the legal age limit for marriage at 15 for girls and 18 for boys in all of India except the state of Jammu and Kashmir; followed by the *2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Prevention Act*; child marriages and the dire consequences that follow for young girls and women remain largely unresolved issues in a country that prides itself as

being *the world's largest democracy* and fastest growing major economy[60] (Schultz & Raj, 2018).

Returning to the questions regarding the histories and development of feminism in India, what is clear is that "colonial rule, the humiliation of the subject population, the impact of Western education, the role of Christian missionaries, growth of an English speaking Indian middle class all led to an intense and contested debate of the women's question in the public sphere" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 14). As stated previously, in a country as large, unequal and diverse as India, the stories and development of feminism are equally diverse. However, these stories are bound by a common colonial past, notwithstanding the fact that the impact and breath of colonialism was equally uneven and differentiated. The period following independence also followed an unquestionably pro-active government approach in the form "of state directed development to address the dual needs of 'growth' with 'equity'" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 42).

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[60] See: https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/child-marriage-shocking-facts-318879-2016-04-20#close-overlay
https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/04/child-brides-marriage-shravasti-india-culture/
https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/battle-india-s-future-democracy-growth-and-inequality#

2.2 –NATIONALIST FEMINISM

The formation of the *Indian National congress* (INC) – *Congress Party* – in 1885 was to give rise to a powerful Nationalist feminism movement within which independence from British Imperial rule as well as women's rights became major issues of contention. Samita Sen states that "The women's movement in India took off in the 1920s, building on the 19th century social reform movement. The women's movement progressed during the period of high nationalism and the freedom struggle, both of which shaped its contours (Sen S. , 2000, p. 2). Maitrayee Chaudhuri asserts that modernity and capitalism in India were part of the legacy of colonialism, as such, nationalism as well as feminism need to be appraised in the context of part of the "modern democratic project" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 19).

However, the relationship between liberal democracy and feminism was always a complex equation and a far cry from the desired objective of true equal rights for all. As Chaudhuri points out, in fact the reality was often the "refashioning of households and families" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 19) using moulds that bore important cultural elements of Victorianism. In many cases equal rights was in fact the recasting of women "as creatures of domesticity, and the housewife" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 19), within which the housewife became the

correct fulltime and natural vocation expected of a respectable woman. Chaudhuri goes so far as to state that

> Reformers thus wanted to devise a system of education for females that would "enable the wife to serve as a solace to her husband in his bright and dark moments... to superintend the early instruction of her child, and the lady of the house to provide those sweet social comforts, idealized in the English word "Home" (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 42).

Following this line of reform, a new model of domesticated educated Indian woman and respectable family woman who upheld conventional Christian morality became the popularized image of the new liberated Indian woman. As per the above model, in most cases it was considered that girls did not need to be educated to the same level and standards as boys. "Women have but one resource, Home. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to minister to comfort, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies", (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 20). Notwithstanding, the end of the 1800s saw a surge of nationalist feminism that not only challenged British imperialism in India but gave rise to movements which championed women's civil and legal rights. As Geraldine Heng asserts, "Historically, almost without exception, feminism has arisen in the Third World in tandem with nationalist moments–whether in the form of anticolonial/anti-imperialist struggle, national modernization and reform movements, or religious-nationalist/cultural-nationalist revivalisms" (Heng, 1996,

p. 31). Indian feminism and reform movements were no different; they involved all of the above elements as well as the participation of Indian, British, Irish and North-American women, amongst others. Annie Besant (1847-1933), Margaret Cousins (1878-1954), and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) were all key participants of feminism in the nationalist movement

What is more, as Partha Chattergee states, the nationalist movement agenda in India made formal education not only acceptable, but a requirement for the "new respectable woman" (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 628). The new nationalist construct was founded on the basis of the new educated woman who was supposed to be cultured in the so understood refined feminine attributes of Hindu spiritual superiority. This converted the acquisition of the stated cultural refinement, through education, a personal challenge, especially for the upper/middle class women; to the point where women's education was equated with personal and nationalist freedom. Women embraced the challenge of educating themselves wholeheartedly, accepting even the discourses that included

> claims of cultural superiority […] over Western women for whom, it was believed, education meant only the acquisition of material skills to compete with men in the outside world an hence a loss of feminine (spiritual) values; superiority over the preceding generation of women in their homes who had been denied the opportunity of freedom by an oppressive and degenerated social tradition; and superiority over the lower classes who were culturally

incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 628).

The above nationalist construct, that converted the idea of reform as a virtuous project in which both men and women had to necessarily be involved was vital for the creation of the first generation of educated women as agents to promote the patriarchal nationalist concept of the "new woman" who was full of "feminine virtues" including chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 629). It was thus understood that education would inculcate women with the "virtues" of discipline, self-control, cleanliness, while making her more conscious and prepared for her familial role, hence accentuating her responsibilities in family maintenance, without disrupting the basic patriarchal social relationship of male dominance.

Within this context, women were permitted to start occupying public spaces eventually even taking up employment outside the home, so long as this did not undermine or threaten her womanly virtues. These essential virtues that defined women's femininity were set in specific, culturally visible elements, marked by the accepted form of dress, – the style in which she draped her sari – eating and drinking habits, – they could not drink or smoke like men – social demeanour, behaviour, etc. As such, through the cunning use of coercive patriotic rhetoric in subtle persuasive tactics,

> The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 629).

This was expressed clearly in the construction of women as goddess or mother, to be adored and sanctified as per classical Indian religious and medieval religious imagery of goddesses; a construct that predominates much of modern Indian literature. In this way, the mythical wife goddesses of Hinduism like *Sita* and *Savitri*, became representations of ideal Indian womanhood; devoted to her husband as his aid and complementary other half, showing utmost respect and reverence for her elders while never abandoning her virtues of self-sacrifice and benevolence. The cultural deification of motherhood in Indian tradition represented by goddesses such as Sita and Parvati became an important tool for establishing the concept of India, the powerful civilisation, to the colonial forces. As mothers, Indian women not only represented the epitome of loving and caring maternal figure, but also the bearer of healthy offspring, that is, “the mother as race nourisher” (Thapar S. , 1993, p. 84) and educator of the “future enlightened citizens of India” (Thapar S. , 1993, p. 84). Chatterjee asserts that the “ideological form in which we know the “woman” […] today is wholly a product

of the development of a dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630).

It would seem that as the nationalist movement gathered force and momentum, the true reform movement decelerated as

> […] all aspects of traditional Indian were espoused as the 'truth' of Indian culture. At the core of this spousal was the 'pure' Indian woman, seen by the nationalists as a continuous link to an undefiled ancient age, the bearer of all the virtues of ideal mother and wife (Sinha G. , 2019, p. 54).

This new construct of "woman" was to represent the nation thereon. The compelling use of mythological characteristics of femininity within this construct created the dominant image of nation as represented by the Indian woman's feminine and "spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity" (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630). This construct of woman was perfectly in sync with traditional patriarchal values, posing no threat to the status quo while in fact helping to enhance the "masculinity" of Indian men. Indian men's masculinity was a thorny issue as colonial officials justified the need for British rule and India's unfitness for self-rule due to their lack of masculinity, as in self-control, which was considered the attribute of "civilized men"; a characteristic considered lacking in Indian men, as demonstrated by the practice of child marriages and other customs. The question of Indian men's masculinity was brought to the forefront of the nationalist discourse by Katherine Mayo's highly

controversial book, *Mother India*, which characterised Indian men with the adjectives of "inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, sterility of enthusiasm," (Mayo, 1927 , p. 78) amongst others. As such, the Indian woman's femininity had to be construed in such a way as to facilitate proof of the Indian man's masculinity.

The implications of the various constructs of woman as goddess, mother and nation are manifold. To begin with, the image of woman in any of the above named constructs served to effectively erase her sexuality outside the home. Partha Chattergee highlights some of these implications. Apparently, Indian middle-class employment appears to be relatively free of gender discrimination, compared to in the West, where campaigns against gender discrimination in the work place have been central in women's rights movements throughout. Nevertheless, in India, middle-class employment has definitely been at the centre of bitter disputes and competition between distinct cultural groups, differentiated by caste, religion, language and other diversities. This difference is quite significant, as Chatterjee states, in referring to middle-class employment; "in the entire period of nationalist and postcolonial politics in India, gender has never been an issue of public contention" (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630).

According to Chatterjee, it would seem that attributing specific feminine and masculine ideologies to the nation as distinguished by the material as in masculine and the spiritual as in feminine served to get rid of possible competitive elements between women who entered into the professional world and male job

seekers. However, distinctions were definitely made between those women who decided to take up occupations outside the home. Depending on how working women dressed, or behaved, "their adherence or otherwise to religious marks of feminine status," (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630), earned them the labels of 'Westernised', 'traditional', or 'low class' ", (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630). It is clear that the dominating patriarchy used a mix of subtle coercive influence in order to establish an "inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of women as goddess or as mother" (Chatterjee P. , 1993, p. 130). The Westernised Indian woman was amongst the most extreme objective of derision by the nationalist stereotype upholding "normal" behaviour, which is to this day exploited to the maximum in presentations for the public through commercial media, television, film advertising and fashion.

Considered as deviations from the accepted norms, "Westernised" meant immoral, sexually promiscuous, brazen, avaricious, irreligious; everything contrary to the "normal" woman, – mother, sister, wife, daughter. The "common Westernised" woman construct was indispensable for women's new found "freedom" to be contained within the limits established by the nationalist leaders. As such, the "common woman" was in direct contrast to the "new woman". She was

> […] coarse, promiscuous and vulgar. […] the nautch girls, street-vendors, fisherwomen, washer women, […]. Besides lacking the veneer of gentility, these women, due to economic compulsion, were forced to eke out an

> existence on the streets. They thus lacked the attributes of docility and submissiveness which were ingrained in middle-class women (Thapar S. , 1993, p. 83).

It is without question that the constructs of the "new woman" as opposed to the "common women" created its own set of restrictions regarding what was acceptable behaviour. Chattergee explains that,

> An analogous set of distinctions would mark out the "low-class" or "common" woman from the "normal." […] the most extreme object of contempt for the nationalist is the stereotype of the Anglo-Indian– Westernised and common at the same time. […] deviation from the norm also carries with it the possibility of a variety of ambiguous meanings–signs of illegitimacy became the sanction for behaviour not permitted with those who are "normal" " (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630).

The definitions of womanhood constructed in these contexts became central themes that have been used and reused, again and again in the commercial industries of film, advertising and fashion; thus these constructs have effectively become ingrained convictions within the psyche of the Indian public. As Chattergee asserts, we have

> […] the displacement in nationalist ideology of the construct of woman as a sex object in Western patriarchy: the nationalist male thinks of his own

> wife/sister/daughter as “normal” precisely because she is not a “sex object” those who could be “sex objects” are not “normal”, (Chatterjee P. , 1989, p. 630).

Thus, the representation also of the nation as the embodiment of the *pure national femininity* of Mother India effectively conditioned women’s sexual freedom. It continues to force them into the sort of inflexible fixed state within the image of women as goddess or mother which erases their sexuality outside the private domain of the home.

2.2.1 ANNIE BESANT (1847-1933)

As the first woman to have been elected as President of the *Indian National Congress,* to lead the nationalist movement, at the age of 70, and not missing the irony that Annie Besant, an Englishwoman from the colonising nation was to lead India to independence; it is appropriate that we examine the woman and her person in some depth so as to understand why she played the role she did within the nationalist movement and why she was able to evoke such unprecedented "respect and love from Indians" (Anderson, 2002, p. 27). See: (2.2.1) FIGURE - 35.

Annie Besant, of Irish origin was born in London on 1 October 1847, in what was a loving and intellectually highly stimulating home. Her father, William Burton Persse Wood had studied medicine in Dublin, but had been forced to give up his practice and move to England after the 1845 famine. Bessant describes her father as a mathematician and scholar who spoke several languages including French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese (Besant, 1933). Her paternal family, prior to her father's birth had been wealthy and well known in England and the City of London, the different male members of the previous generation had all made successful careers in business and politics. Annie Besant's father was also interested in classical and modern literature, and deeply read in philosophy. Tellingly, according to her accounts, Besant's father was also highly

critical and sceptical of Catholicism, despite the fact that his mother and sister were strict Roman Catholics (Besant, 1933).

Annie Besant is known to have had a difficult childhood, following her father's early death when she was just five. His demise plunged her mother into poverty, forcing her to entrust her daughter into the care of a friend, Ellen Marryat, sister of writer Frederick Marryat and a contemporary of Charles Dickens. Ellen Marryat made sure that Annie Besant received an excellent education while also providing her with the opportunities to travel around Europe. Besant was unquestionably amongst one of the most remarkable women to have emerged from the periods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She is known to have taken on political, social and religious causes with ardour, conviction and sincerity; often encountering humiliation and ridicule as she found herself in the middle of controversy and dispute due to the unpopularity of her discourse and advocations which were consistently contrary to the accepted moral, religious, political and social norms and standards of the period, (Taylor, 1992).

She broke up her marriage to an Anglican clergyman when she was in her mid-twenties and joined the *National Secular Society* (NSS), thus effectively renouncing her religious upbringing. She was highly influenced by Charles Bradlaugh, the president of the NSS who encouraged her to lecture and write for the cause of *Freethought*. She was thrust into the spotlight receiving nation-wide notoriety for her defense in a public court of women's right to have access to birth control.

(2.2.1) FIGURE - 35 A, B & C

A – Annie Besant in 1922, On a lecture tour in Sydney, Australia. Retrieved from: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Annie_Besant

B – Annie Besant. Further information unavailable. Retrieved from: https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/b/besant.htm

C – Annie Besant. "Refusal to believe until proof is given is a rational position; denial of all outside of our own limited experience is absurd" (Besant, n.d.). London Stereoscopic Company. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Annie_Besant_-_portrait.jpg

Besant met George Bernard Shaw with whom she had a close, albeit mysteriously tumultuous relationship that lasted many years and also led to her conversion to socialism and joining the Fabian society. Much to Bernard Shaw's dismay, she would later become an ardent follower of Theosophy, which first led her to travel to India, where the Theosophical Society Headquarters was located. She was to remain a Theosophist for all her life, influencing Margaret Cousins who would later also join the society. George Bernard Shaw was to declare that

Besant was "the greatest orator in England and perhaps Europe" (as cited in Nethercot, 1955, p. 4). Bessant was from the very beginning vocal and outspoken about her anti-imperialist opinions regarding British rule and policies, as well as her advocacy for women's rights.

She moved to India when she was in her mid-forties (Taylor, 1992). Her presence in India at first was controversial to say the least. Her opposition to British westernisation of Indian societies in favour of maintaining traditional cultures put her in the uncomfortable position that appeared to defend "traditional Indian patriarchy and resisting efforts to reform the status of Indian women" (Anderson, 1994, p. 563). For obvious reasons, this conservatism was to put her on the receiving end of criticism from many Indian social reformers as well as Western liberals and Christian missionaries. She was to gradually moderate her stance and voice support for Indian women's rights; however, this in turn brought on criticism from Indian nationalists who accused her of being a British imperialist. As Anderson states, "The conflict between loyalty to national heritage and opposition to traditional patriarchy is one that colonized women have commonly experienced" (Anderson, 1994, p. 563). Besant had already established herself

> […] as an iconoclastic rebel who challenged the gods of Victorian respectability. Known as Red Annie, she was a militant atheist, socialist, and trade union organizer, as well as women's rights advocate. She launched her extraordinary public career as a young woman of 26, after she

> had used her loss of faith as the excuse to extricate herself from an unconventional marriage to an Anglican vicar. She therefore combined personal notoriety with inflammatory political and social views (Anderson, 1994, p. 563).

In 1874 Annie Besant gave her first public speech where she spoke out for women's emancipation, questioning their political status while addressing the question of women's emancipation and rights which at the time was "a hotly debated topic in England" (Anderson, 1994, p. 563). The issue had come to the forefront in the 1850s as a result of the movement in demand of improved prospects and opportunities of higher education, employment, divorce law reforms and property rights for women. As such, the 1860s saw the birth and growth of numerous organisations in England working towards women's political rights. Although Annie Besant was not directly involved in any of these, she wrote and spoke widely vocalising her position in favour of women's emancipation. Annie Besant converted to Theosophy in 1889, supposedly connecting to, amongst other things, its most basic principle which is based on "the brotherhood of all, viewed as inclusive of both women and men" (Anderson, 1994, p. 566).

Annie Besant's initial position on her arrival to India, regarding the question of India's religious and cultural diversity as well as Indian women, was extremely questionable in terms of the paradoxically controversial stance she took. Her position offered anything but emancipation for women or other oppressed

groups, within the Indian context. As a Theosophist her highly romanticised perception of India as the land that embodied wisdom in the form of "Eastern religions" (Anderson, 1994, p. 566), making reference to Buddhism, but even more specifically to Hinduism (Anderson, 1994), did scant favour to the cause of egalitarianism in the context of India. Anderson, in no uncertain terms puts into evidence Besant's initially skewed vision in the following text.

> On her voyage over, before she even saw India, Besant gave shipboard lecturers [sic] glorifying Hindu civilization. (She rarely concerned herself with India's Islamic heritage except to criticize the Muslim invasions.) Sounding the theme that she would reiterate again and again in the next years, she praised India as the source of all philosophies and religions, the mother of spirituality. She lamented that Indian civilization had been tarnished by the effects of the Muslim and British invasions. Since then [India] has taken on many of the customs of her conquerors, and lately the veneer of a western and materialistic civilization has done even more harm to her people than much of the Mohammedan conquest did, for it has touched what was left of the inner as well as the outer life. The hope she said was for a reawakening of Indian spirituality, a renaissance of true Hinduism (Anderson, 1994, p. 566) .

Unfortunately, Annie Besant's original discourse lent itself very neatly to an active movement that had originated a few years earlier which was calling for

the rebirth and renaissance of Hinduism to what was supposedly "the glorious past of the early Vedic Aryan society, when there was, they claimed, no child marriage, no seclusion of women, no sati, no rigid caste system" (Anderson, 1994, p. 567). Besant's position and discourse was as unfortunate as it was uninformed, as she went so far as to praise the system of castes as offering stability to society while in the same breath she lamented the plight of modern Indian women quoting the writings of theorists who claimed that during the Vedic times women had been strong and educated. As such, Besant eulogised what she thought of as the ancient Aryan women in words such as,

> What Hindu does not feel his heart shrink with pain when he contrasts those heroic figures with the women of to-day, sweet and pure and devoted as they are by the millions, but still half-children, encaged in the prison of the zenana and the still worse prison of the ignorance in which they dwell (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 567).

Records indicate that Annie Besant immediately and fully embraced Hinduism, and Indian customs and dress; wearing traditional saris and following traditional Hindu customs; even going so far as to declare that she had been born a Brahmin in her past life and bathing in the river Ganges. Besant learnt Sanskrit and translated the *Bhagavad Gita* into English, imparting lectures around India to large audiences including the Nehru family (Spring, 2001). She was a strong influence on the young Jawaharlal Nehru who joined the Theosophy society with

Besant's initiation at the age of 13. Nehru was famously unreligious and soon lost interest in Theosophy or any religious conviction following his English education.

By all indications, Besant's position on the situation of women in India at the time was ambiguous and extremely problematic. As a famous English feminist she was often confronted about her opinions regarding the women's question. However, at that time, in her eagerness to embrace and uphold Hindu traditions and culture and thereby be accepted, she largely refused to comment on issues as questionable as child marriage, widow remarriage or the practice of prostitution through *devadasi* (servant of god) and the traditions dancing temple girls. There are accounts implying that in 1896, Besant voiced in an interview with a British newspaper the opinion that Hindu women were far from subjugated, but in fact accepting and happy of their condition as mostly housebound, isolated and veiled. She defended her non-critical position towards the women's question in India stating that "seclusion was not imprisonment" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 567); using absurd and irrational arguments such as

> To go out into the open street with a face exposed to the gaze of strangers would be as painful to the Hindu wife and mother as it would be painful to her English sister to walk down Whitechapel Road, stripped to the waist. […] The joint family system gives a much wider field for activity than is afforded by the restricted homes of England. The home is in a very real sense the women's kingdom, in which as mother and grandmother, she is

> treated with respect and reverence. Women are not, the toys or drudges that English ignorance names them (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 568).

Besant argued with the British administration declaring that they should be aware of *"cultural relativism"* voicing arguments such as "in dealing with a highly civilized nation you must learn to rule according to its traditions, not according to yours" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 568). Although the British took Besant's arguments into account due to the delicacy of the political climate of the time, which resulted in turbulent mass reactions by the conservative populous to reform measures such as the *1891 Age of Consent Bill*; most Indian and British reformers were highly critical and perturbed by Besant's defence of what were clearly highly damaging and oppressive strands of Hinduism and traditional Indian customs. The Hindustan Review reported that through Annie Besant the Theosophical Society represented mere orthodoxy, inertia and inactivity (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 568).

Besant's position at the time was the absolute opposite to the arguments and views of the British feminists of the late Victorian and Edwardian time who argued for the need of suffrage not only for themselves but also so as to ease what they considered as the "degraded condition of their Indian sisters" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 568). It is ironical to say the least that Annie Besant, who had previously been amongst the most vociferous women's right activist in England, should now be defending a position that coincided with that of the most radicle

and fervent anti-feminist discourse. It is also significant that the "degraded Indian woman in need of rescue" (Anderson, 1994, p. 568) image that was exploited by the British feminists, was also used by Cristian advocates in their arguments against Hinduism.

Annie Besant's polarizing and problematic position during the 1890s was to create many waves courting much criticism from all fronts. Indian social reformers who were pushing for reforms in education, employment possibilities for women, and an end to child marriage did not condone her glorification of Hinduism as it stood. Kaliprasanna Kavyabisharad, a secular scholar and ardent supporter of reform and women's rights highlighted the irony and contradiction of Besant's praise for Hinduism, the Hindu scriptures and the supposed glorification of the ideal Hindu woman as the "object of regard and adoration" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 569). Highlighting the fact that Hinduism denied women access to the scriptures, and as such, Annie Besant herself would not be permitted to read them under Hindu law, he states in no uncertain terms, "Had Mrs. Besant read any Hindu religious books, in the original, she would not have talked loudly about the Hindu idea of woman, which is known in all its grossness even to primary students and beginners" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 569).

Besant even managed to irritate Indian nationalists who believed in the so called Hindu renaissance by restoration to a previous golden age, as part of the agenda of the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885. Bipin Chadra Pal, who later gave his support to Annie Besant, stated that initially

> we who belonged to what claimed to represent the advanced wing of modern thought and life in India, did not quite like this new white missionary among us ... [We] could not easily reconcile ourselves to this new phase of foreign domination. What right, we asked, had this lady from England to pose as a teacher of higher Hindu thought, (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 569).

Besant was thus at the receiving end of criticism from all directions, including Christian missionaries, Indian reformers and even religiously orthodox Hindus, for her endorsement and praise of what at the time was the practice of contemporary orthodox Hinduism. Orthodox Hindus, although content with her message, did not appreciate her person as the disseminator of the message which they viewed as highly suspicious considering the customary disparaging attitude of the British towards Hinduism as barbaric and pagan. She was thus received by orthodox Hindus with great suspicion not only as

> a Westerner, but even more so because she was a woman who exposed herself on public platforms in front of men, even though ironically she spoke in support of a belief system that included the seclusion of women. Moreover she was a woman who had separated from her husband, which was the antithesis of the Indian model of womanly behaviour. As one Hindu critic said, Hinduism will not look with much complacency upon a

> self-styled teacher whose recommendation is that she never loved her husband (Anderson, 1994, p. 570).

However, Annie Besant slowly began to introduce a distinction in her discourse. As Nancy Fix Anderson states, "Besant, a charismatic speaker whose genuine love of Hindu spirituality appealed to both Westerners and Indians, attracted large audiences to her lectures, including the unprecedented attendance of Brahman women" (Anderson, 1994, p. 570). By about the end of the 1890s Besant began to add her voice to reform movements such as the abolishment of child marriage and sub castes, and support for women's education. She initially justified her new stance by making a public declaration through a series of lectures which have been published in a volume titled *'Ancient Ideals in Modern Life',* where she argues in line with other reformers of the time that customs such as child marriage and caste sub divisions were not akin to authentic Hinduism as it had existed in the past and that purging society of these evils was not an imitation of the west, but a return to that golden age version of Hinduism (Besant, 1901).

In her initial caution not to fall out with orthodox Hindu nationalists, Besant proposed a model of Indian woman in correspondence with ancient Indian civilization who was feminine and sexual, making statements such as

> No where will you find stronger, sweeter, and more beautiful types of womanhood. Although men had been the heads of the household, women had much more freedom and authority, than in present day, with the

> seclusion of women only introduced after the Muslim invasions in the sixteenth century. It is not a matter for blame, it is only a matter of regret. In giving women today more freedom, therefore, you would not be following the West, but following your own ancestral custom (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 571); (Besant, 1901).

At this stage without seemingly seeing the contradiction in her position, Besant continued to insist on the importance of women's education within the parameters of ancient Hinduism civilization where the woman was a mother and wife and in some cases a pious ascetic and fulfilled the role of self-sacrifice, devotion as the "ideal Indian women of ancient types, fitting them for the most part, for the life of wives and mothers […] who shall be her husband's friend, counsellor and helper, as well as the joy of his heart and the delight of his life" (Besant, 1901, pp. 128-131). Besant condemned what she termed the system of female education in the west which according to her resulted in the unwanted condition of many women remaining unmarried and not having the support of father or brothers and thus being forced to fend for themselves by gaining their livelihood themselves which necessarily led them into "competition with men" (Besant, 1901, p. 127).

> This is the economic reason underlying the demand for higher education. I presume that no Hindu, unless he has lost his Hindu heart, desires to bring about that economic condition of things here. I presume that he does not

> desire to educate his daughters and send them out into the world to struggle with men for gaining a livelihood, to compete with men in various learned professions, in the various commercial undertakings (Besant, 1901, pp. 127-128).

Besant's new position made her popular with previously critical reformers and her focus on the glory of Hinduism contrasting just as clearly with her criticism of Islam made her especially popular with Hindu supremacists and nationalists. She continued to maintain her stance against widow remarriage which dismayed Indian liberals trying to reform the plight of widows who found themselves ostracised from society. Facing a lifetime of terrible misery and hardship widows were unable to continue in their in-laws home or return to their parents, blamed as they inevitably were for their husband's untimely death as per orthodox Hinduism, where the death of a man is said to be caused by the misfortune of his wife. Many of these widows are very young women as the custom of child marriage and very young women being married to men twice or trice their age is still very much alive in India.

Besant's defence of her position with the argument that "the Hindu ideal of marriage-love was so intense that the wife could not dream of transferring that affection to another (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 572) was met with consternation by an interviewer for the Indian Social Reformer who commented to her "it is very painful that you should feel for the misery and hardships of all and

yet the widow should be excluded from the balm of your sympathy and kindness" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 572). Besant's call for reform within the contours of patriarchal Indian customs that maintained the primacy of the role of women as first and foremost good wives, housewives and mothers allowed her to gain much following amongst both men and women. Her position was not seen as radical but clearly upholding of Hinduism and traditional values.

Nancy Anderson states that during this time before the First World War, Besant once again began to get actively involved in the English suffrage movement, participating in the massive suffragist procession in London in 1911, while also giving speeches in rallies and writing to English newspapers using the liberal arguments of "justice and self-determination" (Anderson, 1994, p. 573); in support of women's suffrage that she had first articulated and become known for in the 1870s. Anderson puts forward interesting arguments regarding the ambiguous tolerance that Besant demonstrated with her contradictory position and discourse in India and England. Anderson suggests that Besant's support for English women's suffrage and independence while endorsing and defending Indian women's domesticity and submissive role towards their husbands revealed a possible, albeit unconscious imperil mentality. She also puts forward the possibility of a "patronizing and arrogant double standard, disguised as cultural tolerance and respect for tradition (Anderson, 1994, p. 573). However, as Nancy Fix Anderson points out, it can also be argued that Annie Besant sought to avoid "the tyrannies of an imperial feminism" (Anderson, 1994, p. 573). As such, she

consciously chose not to impose her Western argument on the context of Indian women. She thereby aligned her activism in India to what at the time was the context and relevant situation there, to the specific place where both male and female Indian reformers situated the Indian woman's role (Anderson, 1994).

By 1913 Annie Besant had taken her discourse in a completely different direction. At this point she changed her approach completely, abandoning totally any commitment to orthodox Hinduism, urging Indians instead to fight for a reformed India as the only path to freedom. She became an active member in the campaign for Indian self-government and delivered lectures and speeches arguing for a rejection of past values and traditional institutions that justified and perpetuated inequality and subjugation. "Even if the reforms violated the principles of Hinduism, as embodied in the authoritative *Laws of Manu*, she supported the changes because (Anderson, 1994, p. 574) "the laws of Nature ... to me are more sacred than any writing, however ancient" (Besant, as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 574).

By 1914, Annie Besant's discourse had taken a radically different turn, one that advocated for everything that she had been against at the beginning of her arrival in India. Geraldine Forbes states that at this point and during the next few years almost everything that Annie Besant touched became political (Forbes G. , 1988). By 1915, Bessant made public her intentions of establishing a *Home Rule League* which was successfully set up by 1916. She campaigned for the complete abolition of the caste system and all its variants, added her voice to the movement

for widow remarriage and training for employment, she reiterated her call against child marriage, arguing for improved education for girls based on equality and an absolute ban to the isolation of women in their homes. Her arguments were powerful and poignant embellished as they were by her exceptional articulateness and incredible oratory skills.

> India could never become great again unless women and men walked side by side and hand in hand, just as a bird could not fly high with one wing broken before it starts upon its flight. […] this shutting up of women is unworthy of civilization. Indian men do not deserve to be free politically, until they give freedom socially to Indian women (Besant, as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 574).

As expected, Besant's new stance quickly brought her voracious criticism from diverse fronts of Indian nationalists and orthodox Hindus, as they accused her of being an imperialist who sought to impose Western norms and standards on Indian society. When accused of trying to convert Indian women into "window-smashing suffragists" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 574), Besant was quick to respond by stating "And what if such an occurrence comes to pass? Far better is even an ugly expression of an unfolding and expanding consciousness than no manifestation of any intelligent life vivifying the graceful forms of our Indian women today" (Besant, as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 574). She received much condemnation voiced in words such as "[…] who are you, madam, that [sic] so

lovingly undertakes to set our house in order for us poor folks" (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 574)? This particular critic was condemning what he saw as Besant's intent

> to degrade Hindu women by making them as free as English women, and to replace the system of child marriage, which guaranteed that every girl would be married, with the horrors of *the* English system of late marriages and redundant women, (as cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 574).

Annie Besant resolved the issues that her new position generated by tying her arguments for Indian women's right to gender equality and emancipation as the only means of fighting British cultural dominance. She laid aside completely her earlier defense of the *Laws of Manu* and her discourse accusing the Muslim invasion of having tainted the glorious Hindu kingdom; arguing simply that before the British invasion, India had been a civilised land of equal rights and that the British, not the Muslims were culpable and responsible for the then current deplorable state of depravation of womanhood. Although Besant's arguments succeeded in neutralizing some of the criticism that was being directed at her they were received with scepticism by many feminists such as the poet Sarojini Naidu. Naidu argued that it was the system of *purdah*[61] that had been established long

[61] Veil to cover the face behind which Hindu and Muslim women of certain regions are forced to remain

before the British invasion that was responsible for the seclusion from society and exclusion of women from education, and that in fact, the presence of the British example was responsible for the ongoing movement in India for emancipation and education for women (Anderson, 1994).

As stated earlier, by 1916 Annie Besant had founded the *Home Rule for India League* in Madras – now Chennai – based on the *Irish Home Rule League*. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, an Indian nationalist, set up another version of the *Home Rule for India League* in Pune. Both organisations worked hand in hand towards using peaceful strategies to mobilize public opinion towards self-government and independence from British rule (Pletcher, 2016). Besant spoke publicly at every opportunity and wrote in her paper the *New India.* Forbes states that her discourse was seen as a threat to the government who quickly demanded that she leave India. When Besant refused to comply she was placed under arrest; however, multitude protests secured her release. In 1917, she was elected as the President of the *Indian National Congress* (Forbes G. , 1988).

Nancy Fix Anderson states that although Besant was concerned with the emancipation of Indian women, her main interest was the issue of self-governance for India. Initially she did not agree to the inclusion of a Women's suffrage plank in the *Home Rule for India League*, as she considered the matter to be excessively delicate and controversial an issue, likely to complicate matters for the cause of self-rule. At the time Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarjadasa were unsuccessful in convincing her to change her mind until May 1917, when they

founded the *Women's Indian Association* (WIA) and invited Annie Besant to serve as president for the association. The new Association which dedicated itself to social reforms and women's franchise also had as its youngest member, Sarojini Naidu, who, as we shall see further on was another of the major players in defining the women's question as well as the nationalist movement.

The WIA which had its first headquarters in Madras, was run by Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Graham Jinarajadasa and other founding members, under the presidency of Annie Besant, – who was also a birth control advocate. It became one of the leading bodies at the time concerned with women's status. Branches of WIA were set up all over the country, using the Theosophical society Lodges networks. The WIA was thus amongst the fundamental bodies in giving women the impetus to take charge of the transformation of their position. Geraldine Forbes highlights how Dorothy Jinarajadasa wrote that "India's future rests with its women […] women must come together to work out ways to improve their position" (New India, 1917, p. 9; as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 528). Kamalabai L. Rau, another founding member stated that the aim of the new organisation was "to educate women and make them conscious of their place in the growing society of the land" (as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 528).

Overcoming numerous difficulties, the WIA gathered women in different regions of the country who had already been affected by various movements. These women in turn worked untiringly, organising meetings with more women, arranging reading lessons and sessions as well as encouraging discussions on

social issues that specifically affected women. These initially modest beginnings led to an increasingly larger involvement with local bodies and organisations. Issues such as women's suffrage, child marriage and women's inheritance rights were raised and discussed. Demands were taken to the appropriate competency bodies and officials, which in turn led to the passing of numerous resolutions. As Forbes states, "The first women's delegation to demand the vote included a large number of WIA members and in the following years it was this organisation which took the lead in mobilizing support for female franchise" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 528).

(2.2.1) FIGURE - 36 A, B, C & D

A – Annie Besant. (c1897). © Hollinger & Rocky, New York. Retrieved from: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c03990/

B – Annie Besant (n.d.) and Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986). Adopted as her protégé at the age of 14, Krishnamurti and his brother benefited from an excellent education. He was proclaimed by Besant to be the Theosophical *World Teacher,* a role he would later reject as an adult. Krishnamurti went on to become an, enlightened and popular teacher, independent writer and lecturer, maintaining a lifelong mother son relationship with Besant, despite their differences. Retrieved from: https://www.ojaihub.com/ojai-pilgrims/

C – Annie Besant and Jiddu Krishnamurti, (1926). General Photographic Agency/Hulton Archive. Source: https://cdn.britannica.com/98/65498-050-F575845D/Jiddu-Krishnamurti-Annie-Besant-1926.jpg

D – Dr. Annie Besant. A pamphlet publicizing two lectures by Besant with Krishnamurti's presence. The event was sponsored by the Theosophical Society at the Scottish Rite Hall, San Francisco on September 24 and September 28, 1926. © The Blanchard Press, Inc. Retrieved from: https://www.saada.org/item/20130722-3035

2.2.2 MARGARET COUSINS (1878-1954)

Margaret Cousins (1878-1954), an Irish suffragist, moved to India in 1915 becoming an active member of the women's nationalist movement. As an Irish woman, Margaret Cousins was able to draw several parallels between the dilemmas suffered in Ireland and those of India as a consequence of both being British colonies. Irish independence, Indian independence and women's rights were the three major shapers and definers of Margaret Cousins' lifelong work. While Home Rule in Ireland was becoming a real possibility with the presence of constitutional and revolutionary nationalists, India saw the formation of the *Indian National Congress* in 1885, also with the aim to fight for Indian Home Rule. Meanwhile, in England, John Stuart Mill, a liberal Member of Parliament laid the foundations, in 1867, for the inclusion of the woman's suffrage amendment bill. Although initially unsuccessful, Mill's efforts gave rise to women's suffrage movements and the formation of numerous women's organisations and movements both in Ireland and England.

Before her arrival in India, during the period before the First World War, both Margaret Cousins and her poet husband James Cousins were active participants in the Irish nationalist movement and the cause of women's suffrage in Ireland, which were increasingly gaining more and more support. They were instrumental and directly involved in the formation of many of the organisations

and movements involved. Margaret Cousins contributed to the weekly newspaper *The Irish Citizen*, writing about a wide array of issues while also maintaining contact with suffragists outside Ireland and England and inviting them to contribute through lecture tours and other means. In 1913, she spent a period in Tullamore prison in Ireland for participating in the breakage of windows in Dublin Castle, which at the time was the centre of the British administration in Ireland. She went on a hunger strike to achieve political status. In a letter to the chair of the prison board, Cousins stated,

> I am not a criminal but a political prisoner—my motives were neither criminal nor personal—being wholly associated with the agitation to obtain Votes for Women. I shall fight in every way in my power against being branded a criminal, (as cited in Women in World History, 2002, para. 18).

Before their decision to immigrate to India, the Cousins' met with Annie Besant in Dublin twice, during her visits back home in 1902 and 1919. Besant had implied to them that their political acumen would be extremely useful and well placed in India. At the time, James Cousins had started contributing as editor to Annie Besant's Theosophist newspaper, *New India* (Candy, 1994). Besant's visits were to mark a new chapter in the lives of the couple. India, at the time, apparently offered Margaret and James the "scope for freedom of self-expression" (Candy, 1994, p. 586), which they seemed to have lost in Ireland. In Adyar, Madras, where the Theosophical headquarters was located, they were able to

develop discourses in spiritual, feminist and cultural politics and nationalism based on pluralism that included anti-communal and caste reforms (Candy, 1994).

> Within my first year of landing on Indian soil I was dedicated to the service of India via service to that half of India—its womanhood—which seemed to me the most direct instrument for leverage of the whole people, (Margaret Cousins, as cited in Women in World History, 2002, para.7).

Cousins was to use her previously acquired political knowledge and experience to drive and negotiate the nationalist and feminist causes of the period in India, becoming one of the major and most significant figures of Indian history of that period. The promotion of women's education at every level was to become one of her major commitments. She was the first non-Indian to be elected as a member of the Women's university in Poona in west-central Maharashtra (Women in World History, 2002). Acting as the first woman magistrate in India, she used her position and influence, alongside Annie Besant, to push for reforms in the education system, campaigning for compulsory education for girls while setting up girls' schools as well as child and maternity welfare clinics in different regions. In the midst of a number of women's reform movements, in 1917 she contributed to the formation of the previously examined, *Women's India Association* (WIA), as a network through which to lobby for suffrage and also took up as the editor of *Stri Dharma*, the WIA monthly journal (Candy, 1994). Cousins and her supporters' persistent efforts bore fruit as Madras – now Chennai – on the eastern

coast of the southern state of Tamil Nadu became the first region in India to grant women full suffrage rights in 1917 (Women in World History, 2002). Over the next ten years the rest of India followed suit and Cousins is said to have proudly declared "women in India had full suffrage earlier than British women who had to wait until 1928 to qualify for the vote at the age of 21" (Women in World History, 2002, p. para. 19).

Margaret Cousins was involved in numerous issues connected to feminist concerns, as matters that needed urgent attention in order to address the women's question. She authored two books[62] as well as several journal and newspaper articles, highlighting areas such as child marriage and motherhood, the *purdah* (the system of face coverage and restriction of movement in orthodox societies), widowhood as well as lack of access to education or activities outside the domestic sphere. The causes she upheld became the subjects of numerous conferences contributing thus to these previously somewhat low visibility issues taking centre stage within the socialist / nationalist movement.

1925 saw the establishment of the *National Council of Women in India* (NCWI); as the Indian version of the *International Council of Women*, it became the first "all-India women's organisation intimately associated with an international organisation" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 529). Forbes states that the

[62] Awakening of Asian Womanhood (1922); Indian Womanhood Today (1941)

NCWI's international connections inhibited its powers in the period of increasing nationalist sentiments; however, this did not stop it from providing a voice for Indian opinions in international forums. The NCWI emerged as a body which "sought to affiliate various groups, act as a voice for its affiliates and as a clearing house for various kinds of work being done to help women" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 529). The NCWI was not filled with nationalist fervour as were other women's organisations of the period, but it was upheld by many British women and Indian women from elite and wealthy families. It was as such, well-versed to "sharing a feminist ideology and at times, acting very effectively to express women's issues in the political arena" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 529).

Cousins' Irish background also made her highly sympathetic and active in the Indian nationalist movement. She became active within the *Indian National Congress* party which was at the forefront of the movement for independence, speaking on their behalf and specifically disobeying and protesting the British ordinances that prohibited public speaking. She maintained close ties with Mohandas Gandhi, speaking up for the nationalist cause and in Gandhi's defence in a mass meeting in New York in 1932, and a few months later, in Geneva, in support of Indian independence in a meeting of the *League of Nations*. "In those centres of international opinion I laid bare the dual game Britain is playing; its pretence of making a Constitution to give India freedom, but its determination to hold tight to everything essential to India's self-government" (Margaret Cousins, as cited in Women in World History, 2002, para. 27).

In late 1932, Cousins sought legal counselling while also liaising with Gandhi – who was incarcerated at the time – and other leaders of the nationalist movement regarding the decree prohibiting public speaking. Going against it, she held a public meeting of over 1000 people defending the cause of independence which landed her in prison for ten and a half months. While in prison, she was brought face to face with the issue of capital punishment through the hanging of a woman who had been accused of a domestic murder which she professed to not have committed. Capital punishment became another issue against which Margaret Cousins was to vigorously campaign. As we have seen, Margaret Cousins feminist discourse in India englobed numerous political and social issues.

It is an unquestionable fact that during her lifetime Margaret Cousins was actively involved in "a staggering array of feminist causes" (Candy, 1994, p. 587). These included the extension of voting rights as well as the placement of women in political and legal office. She was an active part of both the campaign to raise the age of marriage as well as the passing of the final act, termed the *Sarda Act*, in 1929. She also continued with Annie Besant's campaigns to promote birth control and contributed in the revival of the indigenous arts and crafts industries of India. From 1917 onwards up until the 1930s, as mentioned previously, Cousins established branches of the WIA, particularly in south India using the network of Theosophical branches that existed. The WIA was mainly accessible to upper-caste women who used the occasion to create "a kind of Theosophical enfranchisement of women's right to speak (Candy, 1994, p. 587).

In January, 1927 Cousins founded the more nationally based *All India Women's Conference* (AIWC), – "The most important women's organisation" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 529) – as she realised that suffrage rights granted to women of the elite classes by the provincial legislative assemblies was not going to suffice in bringing about "the broad based reforms for which she had hoped" (Candy, 1994, p. 588). Through the AIWC and its executive, Cousins went on to negotiate a renewal of the Indian educational system which took into account indigenous traditional cultures. Cousins' position was that this would be an educational reform that would grow an "authentic Indian child" (Candy, 1994, p. 588). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who was closely associated with Cousins and her activism as well as being her "self-avowed disciple (Candy, 1994, p. 588) stated that

> One idea that the women's conference stressed very much was that the child is a potential power, and it was important that his potential should be developed, that it was not a blank slate on which the teacher wrote. So that the child should have opportunities for every type of creativity [sic]]. A lot of stress was laid on music, dance and crafts, that these should be introduced in schools, (as cited in Candy, 1994, p. 588).

Cousins made it a priority to refrain from imposing "the full text of colonial femininity onto the lives of Indian natives" (Bose P. , 2003, p. 74) working instead consciously from the perspective of theorizing as a witness while

respecting and guaranteeing the authority of "the Indian woman to document her own social situation and formula of resistance" (Bose P. , 2003, p. 74). Purnima Bose states that

> Her conception of her own agency, in this context, was discursive, taking the form of writing in solidarity with the Indian women's movement, by acting as a witness to it and strategically directing her arguments in support of the Indian women's social and political agenda to an external western audience" (Bose P. , 2003, p. 75).

Many of the delegates of the WIA were educated women who had left the traditional secluded environments of the home, *zenana* and *purdah* far behind them. However, as we have seen previously, the work in education was often with women who were still secluded. Discussions of female education highlighted the paradox of the problems around social customs of seclusion and purdah, and child marriage, as systems that had been established to constrain women and their access to education. Most women's primary education was destined to be interrupted by childhood marriage and attending of public schools after marriage was mostly forbidden. The WIA as well as the AIWC and other organisations were thus quick to recognise the urgent need to include social issues alongside women's education as issues that were inseparable from politics resulting in the discussions of Indian nationalism taking place alongside discussions of women's issues.

Geraldine Forbes explains that Indian women, especially of that period, rejected the English label 'feminist' interpreting the term as being unpatriotic and anti-men. Women's issues could not be seen to supersede or take precedence to those of the nation and men were not the 'enemy'. The 'enemy' was considered to be the 'customs' which had come in place as a result of imperialism invasions and wars. Women's issues were considered to be a legitimate concern hand in hand alongside concerns for the freedom from foreign powers' domination and exploitation. Forbes asserts that at the time,

> The ideology of women's rights […] derived its legitimacy from the notion of the 'Golden Age' when women were free to participate in political and social affairs. […] from the nineteenth century reform movement and its definition of female responsibility from the conception of an enlarged role for the woman who could bring her special 'womanly' talents to improve the world (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 529).

The above concept will be more clearly examined further ahead. It is clear that although Margaret Cousins negotiated amongst diverse contexts of feminist activism and cultural experiences, (Ireland and India); she was able to conceive and construct her agency consistently within the feminist collectives and organisations in which she was acting. As such her feminist praxis was consistently grounded within collectives whose agendas included political objectives. This is demonstrated through her role as a founding member of the

Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), the *Women's Indian Association* (WIA) as well as the *All India Women's Conference* (AIWC). As editors of the study titled *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have highlighted in their essays by analysing the activities of feminist movements and organisations that there is no doubt that women define themselves differently by virtue of involvement in political movements (Heng, 1996, p. xxxix).

In the 1980s, Stuart Hall's influential and far reaching lectures and essays on the evolving concepts of cultural studies as vital ingredients in identifying sites of empowerment with intellectual precision and hope, defined the theory of articulation as a link that can connect two different elements within particular contexts. "A theory of articulation is a theory of 'no necessary belongingness,' which requires us to think the contingent, non-necessary connections between and among different social practices and social groups" (as cited in Runtz, 2018, para. 14). Margaret Cousins' writing and work in Ireland and India are clear examples of Stuart Hall's theory of articulation of experiences that provide the basis for feminist activism across geopolitical and colonial sites; offering thus a true model of a transcultural activist movement.[63]

[63] For more on this please see: Organizing Empire: Individualism, Collective Agency, and India. By Purnima Bose

2.2.3 MAHATMA MOHANDAS GANDHI (1869-1948)

To live with the saints in heaven
Is a bliss and a glory
But to live with a saint on earth
Is a different story.

– Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's secretary, (as cited in Tunzelmann, 2018, para. 16).

Mohandas Gandhi's arrival on the Indian political scene in the 1920s was significant to women's image, her role in the nationalist movement as well as her role as martyr. Gandhi was very critical of customs like *purdah* and the *devadasi* tradition that were overtly harmful and closeted women in the dark, however, he did believe in gender specific roles and had clear ideas about how women could participate in nationalist politics and the movement for independence. Gandhi considered that for Indian women the characteristics of self-sacrifice and suffering in silence were ingrained and second nature. As such, Gandhi saw women as being in the perfect position to further the predominant concepts of his movement of *Ahimsa* – non-violence. "Woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love which again, means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure?" (as cited in

Corazza, 2018, p. 6). Gandhi stated that "if non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women" (as cited in Thapar, 1993, p. 86).

Chiara Corazza states that Gandhi considered women's freedom to be limited to within the confines of her marriage, she was independent as concerned her role and service towards those closest to her, her husband, children and her country. Gandhi was unable to embrace the true emancipation of women and actually break the shackles of tradition and has as such been accused of male chauvinism as well as misogyny. Corazza asserts that "Gandhi's real failure was that of not recognizing that the independence of India without women's emancipation would not be true independence" (Corazza, 2018, p. 6).

In any case, Gandhi's strategies and experiments with civil disobedience helped to set the foundations for Indian women's political identity and the collaborations between themselves and western women. Gandhi was inspired by the English suffragists to adapt the use of hunger strikes to establish his non-violent movement (Corazza, 2018). His view on the role of women in the fight for freedom transformed the original reformist ideas and brought about the mass participation of women in the independence movement which in turn resulted in the emergence of women from the domestic sphere into the public arena.

With the mass public emergence of women to join the nationalist movement a new issue evolved, that of the question of distinguishing between the *'respectable'* women on the street from *'common'* women of the streets. As a result, the "new woman" construct was further altered incorporating features like

"strength of will, steadfastness of purpose and fortitude in the face of adversity" (Thapar S. , 1993, p. 87). Sujata Patel states that "the new image of women that Gandhi creates is drawn from one particular historical and social setting and for one particular political goal: to unite the different strata in India against imperialism" (as cited in Corazza, 2018, p. 6). The latest 'new woman' was expected to stoically bear the long absences of her husband in the face of conflict, his imprisonment and tortured at the hands of the British police while at the same time being willing to leave her home and take charge of the positions of leadership, as necessary, in the absence of her husband.

The concept of *'motherhood'* also broadened, taking on characteristics of defenders of nation. "The image of the 'nurturer of civilization' of Indian mothers was expanded to include the idea of the mother as 'defender of civilization', (Thapar S. , 1993, p. 88). Mother was thus construed as 'motherland' translated literally into "*Bharat Mata*". The construction of motherhood with nation basically drew a parallel between women's duties as mothers with women's duties to the nation, in this case, the motherland. "*Bharat Mata* was projected as the ultimate mother, with all Indians as her sons and daughters. This mother, when in danger, could summon her countless children to her aid" Thapar S. , 1993, p. 88). For a diverse sample of the above iconography in popular Indian visual culture, see: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21 and (1.2.4) FIGURE - 22; (2.2.3) FIGURE - 37, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 38, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 39, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 40 and (2.2.3) FIGURE - 41.

This concept of Bharat Mata served to generate patriotic sentiments, creating a sense of commitment and duty, even devotion to the nation which prevented women from overtly expressing anger when their fathers, husbands or sons became victims of the clashes for independence. The deified image of a single mother of the whole nation whose purity and honour had to be protected also served to generate nationalistic sentiments throughout the country. The imagery and concept of Bharat Mata was unequivocally established in the consciousness of Indians to the extent that the sentiment continues to prevail all over India even to this day. Bharat Mata is invariable portrayed either as the mother nation in distress, suffering the evils of sinful outsiders, using the imagery of "a crowned and beautiful woman in 'shackles' weeping 'tears of blood' or […] holding aloft a trident and leading her countless sons and daughters to battle" Thapar S. , 1993, p. 88). See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21 and (1.2.4) FIGURE - 22; (2.2.3) FIGURE - 37, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 38, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 39, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 40, and (2.2.3) FIGURE - 41.

This imaging is repeated time and time again through literature, poetry, music, film, theatre and any other media that could serve the purpose. Although the symbolic representation of the nation as mother and woman through Barat Mata served to not only permit but encourage women to actively participate in the nationalist movement, the manipulation of the image of women as nation benefitted mostly the male nationalist leaders, women continued to be relegated to

the domestic spheres as the only ones responsible for labours that were and are considered as 'women's chores' in the domestic arena.

(2.2.3) FIGURE - 37 A, B & C

A – The actress, Nargis in what was perhaps her most famous role in Mehboob Khan's block buster *Mother India* (representing the nation) on the cover of FilmIndia, (1957). Retrieved from: https://www.cinematerial.com/movies/mother-india-i50188

B – D. Banerjee, (1930-40), *Bharat Mata/Mother India*. [Popular print], in which Mother India is portrayed with her hands shackled alongside portraits of Madan Mohan Malviya, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Maulana Azad and Pt Chitranjan Das, important political figures during the independence struggle. Retrieved from: https://www.thechanhack.com/2019/09/three-images-of-bharat-mata-analysed.html

C – *Mother India*, (1938). An older film, previous to Mehboob Khan's with the same title and very similar iconography and story line already pointed to the tendency of the gendered imaging of the nation into woman and sacrificial mother. It was directed by Veteran Gunjal, starring Sharifa and was produced by India Cine Pictures Ltd. Retrieved from: http://www.filmkailm.com/mother-india-1938/

Geraldine Forbes states that although Gandhi's leadership and women's role in the struggle for freedom were closely linked, and that women and gender topics were central in Gandhi's speeches, and writings; historians have found much discrepancy between Gandhi's focus on women, his attention to women's issues and his relationships with them (Forbes G. , 2018). Gandhi always remained very traditional in his opinion regarding women, always considering that their familial responsibilities were not to be interfered with by their involvement in public service. However, as Forbes also points out, in an era where men's "masculinity" appeared vulnerable, Gandhi's attitude may have been his way of securing the approval of the *'male guardians'* of women, by assuring them of their safety in order to be able to enlist their services in the movement. As such, Gandhi went to great lengths to make sure that women's political participation did not become a threat to men's masculinity (Thapar S. , 1993).

The complexities and paradoxes of Gandhi's position can be appreciated from one of the first articles he wrote regarding the role of women in *Young India*. Gandhi refused to support a campaign for "votes for women" even though, within the same text, he stated that "he wanted women to take their proper place by the side of men" (as cited in Dhingra, 2014, p. 33). Dhingra cites that those who did not favour women's suffrage argued that

[…] the participation of women in public life would cripple family life and distract responsible mothers from domestic duties. They warned of reversal of

traditional gender roles. Their main fear was that Indian women may imitate Western women whose shameless behaviour they rejected, (Dhingra, 2014, p. 34).

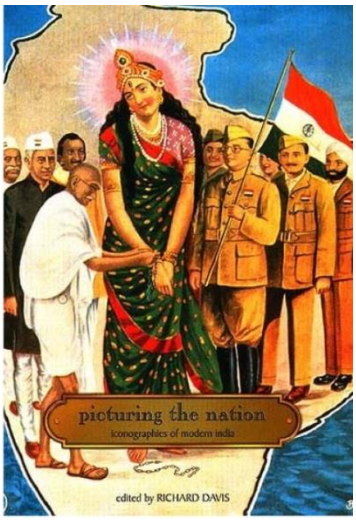
Forbes states that, "Despite his rhetoric about women working side-by-side with men, Gandhi's first efforts to involve women in the freedom struggle were consistent with essentialist gender roles: they would spin and wear Khadi"[64] (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 16). However, Forbes also states that Gandhi's attitude and ideas regarding women's roles were not static, they did evolve. Gandhi's return to India from South Africa reunited him with women like Ramabai Ranade, Dr Kadambini Ganguli and others who had supported his work there. These women who had spent much time and effort striving to improve women's status, reduce their suffering and promote social change were well aware of the importance of politics in achieving results.

The first politically active women soon began arranging meetings pertinent to women's issues, often forbidding men to attend. Lack of medical care, the need for education, child welfare and marriages were reiterating issues at the centre of discussions and efforts involving women. Numerous organisations and societies for women's improvement began to spring up and by 1917 there were organisations throughout the country, well capable of "articulating women's issues and launching projects to achieve goals" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 16).

[64] Referring to the homespun, typically hundred percent cotton cloth made in India.

In 1918, Gandhi delivered what was his first comprehensive speech on women in India at a meeting in a Gujarati women's organisation called *Bhagini Samaj*. In this talk, Gandhi made clear his opposition to the contents of religious texts, laws and customs that advocated the subordination of women. He called for efforts for "*women's regeneration*" (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018, p. 16) in order to overcome these traditions stating that his travel experiences had demonstrated that "women understood and abhorred customs that prevented them from enjoying equal rights and participating in 'the activities of man'" (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018, p. 16). He advocated what women's organisations had been debating for over a decade, the awakening of women to their condition, education and formation of women leaders and women as active participants in fighting for their rights.

At the same time, Gandhi emphasised the importance for the nation of *Swadeshi and Satyagraha*, – to only use and wear homespun cloth, and the disobedience of laws, as non-violent resistance. Gandhi asserted that using home spun cloth and abandoning foreign textiles was the only way of advancing the economy. As such, he argued that "The home was the site of domestic consumption where women were in charge; in this battle, women were more important than men" (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018, p. 17).



(2.2.3) FIGURE - 38 A & B

A – PS Ramachandra Rao, (1937). *Vande Mataram,* [popular print of a painting]. The title refers to the national hymn that portrayed India as a mother goddess, written by the poet journalist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

"At the height of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, Sandip, the nationalist protagonist of Rabindranath Tagore's novel, Ghare Baire, had famously proclaimed before his muse, Bimala, 'The geography of the country is not the whole truth. No one can give up his life for a map. True patriotism will never be aroused in our countrymen unless they can visualise the motherland-we must make a goddess of her!' So it was as a woman-turned-goddess that the motherland took on its popular allegorical image, rising out of the map of India to receive the supreme sacrifice of the lives of her martyred sons. There is an increasingly visceral, gory and sensationalist career of this mass-manufactured icon in loudly coloured popular prints-as she stands surrounded by severed heads of nationalist heroes who went to the gallows, or cradles a bleeding Gandhi, and creates a fictional unified galaxy of leaders that turn the history of the nationalist movement on its head" (Guha-Thakurta, 2016, p. para. 3). Retrieved from: https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/guest-column/story/20160530-bharat-mata-the-nation-as-a-goddess-828923-2016-05-19#ssologin=1#source=magazine

B – Richard H. Davis, (n.d.). Cover of *Picturing The Nation: Iconographies of Modern India*. Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd. Gandhi frees *Bharat Mata's* chained hands, flanked by figures of the nationalist movement. Jawaharlal Nehru is recognisable behind Gandhi. Retrieved from: https://www.exoticindiaart.com/book/details/picturing-nation-iconographies-of-modern-india-IDH469/

In many of his meetings addressing middle-class women, Gandhi urged them to consider the poorer women for whom spinning *khadi* (homespun) meant the means to an income, even as he also chastised them for complaining about the discomfort due to the coarseness and weight of homespun saris. He compared the wearing of heavy saris with pregnancy, stating that "women joyfully carried extra weight during pregnancy and then suffered giving birth. "This is the time for the birth of a new India," he told them, "You can make India free only if you bear this burden" (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018, p. 17).

Women across the country were quickly drawn into Gandhi's discourse; women leaders of organisations and societies urged their attendees and members to be ready and willing to "leave their homes to serve the country" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 17). They began actively participating in civil disobedience actions and demonstrations, such as demonstrating against the Prince of Wale's visit to the country, which ended with severe repercussions, and selling *Khadi* on the streets in rebellion against a government ban. The event led to several women being arrested, leading to huge protests from different communities of Indians. "Word of their arrest resulted in a huge crowd of *Marwaris*, Muslims, *Bhattias*, *Sikhs*, coolies, mill-hands and school boys", (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 17).

Just as his experiences in South Africa had shown him, Gandhi was very quick to understand the value of having women participating in the demonstrations. Thus, he further stressed the role that women could play in the

freedom movement encouraging and pushing them to come forward, even if it meant imprisonment.

> "I had hoped," […] "women would be spared the honour of going to jail." But now these women had been arrested, he urged everyone to "welcome this innovation." Henceforth, "the women of India should have as much share in winning swaraj[65] as men…I hope that the women all over India will take up the challenge and organize themselves" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 18).

Despite Gandhi's traditionalist, paradoxical stance on gender roles, the significance of his contribution to the cause of women is better understood in the context of the historical period and prevalent societal norms. Gandhi grew up in a society where only the '*wretched'* – to borrow Fanon's terminology – women, especially widows and the lower classes and caste women worked outside the home. They were, without exception, employed either in menial, poorly paid labour or worked as *dancer entertainers* of some form or the other to male customers. Inadvertently, they were also extremely easy victims to sexual harassment and abuse. This was a society where widows were often forced into prostitution, to the extent that the term widow, in certain contexts, is also a synonym for prostitute (Sahni, Shankar, & Apte, 2008). *Respectable* middle and

[65] Swaraj refers to self-rule; also self-discipline, in Sanskrit.

upper class/caste women worked inside their homes and limited their movement to spaces that formed part of their neighbourhood, their extended family social circles and religious sites.

In calling out to women and paving the way for them to actively participate, alongside men, for the nationalist cause; thus drawing them into the public arena, Gandhi challenged some of the most deeply entrenched social norms of Indian society. As Lina Fruzzetti and Rosa Maria Perez state,

> It was Gandhi who managed to "temporarily" deconstruct the unseen yet unquestionably observed cultural code of conduct that caused separation between gender and social spaces. Nationalists' debates and discourses were not privatized; instead, they were publicly discussed and argued out (Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002, p. 42).

Although over a century later many of these issues are ongoing questions, Gandhi's role in contesting widely held beliefs and issues directly connected to women's sexuality cannot be overstated. The belief that women were easily seduced, weak, and thus in need of surveillance for their own protection was permanently contested. Women and men were brought together to occupy common spaces in an unprecedented manner, thus also challenging the fear and threat of sexual encounters, forced or consensual. The dangers of assault or sexual harassment that women could face from possible arrest and imprisonment became new issues to contend with. Gandhi interrogated the new position of

women in various articles, connecting women's participation in the freedom movement also with freeing India of the ills of hunger, communalism, caste discrimination and vices such as drunkenness and violence against women (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018).

Gandhi insistently claimed that the problem lay not with women but with men. He criticised men for looking upon women lasciviously and failing to see and treat them as their mothers, wives or sisters while also encouraging women to view all men as their brothers. Unfortunately, Gandhi did also state that women who felt that their purity was threated could "exercise their power to die" (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018, p. 19); as in commit suicide. Although Gandhi did not in any way intend to advocate suicide, the discourse that establishes a woman's purity or lack of therein with non-marital sexual encounters, whether forced or consensual, is one that is clearly visible in Hindu religious scripts. This has had the consequential effect of driving rape victims to committing suicide; or women opting for that route due to premarital pregnancy or an amorous relationship that does not end in marriage. (Radhakrishnan & Andrade, 2012). Additionally, rape victims often court accusations of bringing dishonour to their families and are even blamed for their fate (Estrin, 2015).

Notwithstanding, Gandhi's insistent and clear intent was to convince society to overcome traditional stigmas regarding women sharing public spaces with men by convincing his readers and listeners of the respectability and honour of women who participated in public political demonstrations. Gandhi openly

denounced child marriage, mistreatment of widows and customs that relegated women to the level of subordinate to men, condemning these traditions as "*blemishes* in the shastras" (as cited in Forbes, G., 2018, p. 19).

In incorporating gender in the nationalist representation and discourse, Gandhi was determined to nurture women leaders who "would have authority in the society and their example would erase the impression left by erroneous smritis" [66] (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 19). Gandhi used the examples of the goddesses Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti who were worshiped and revered for their "courage, determination, moral strengthen, and fortitude" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20), stating that these were the pure, firm and self-controlled heroines who were the women of India. Fruzzetti and Perez state that "Gandhi's life-long fight on behalf of the untouchables had as its counterpart his modern concerns towards women" (Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002, p. 41). Gandhi considered that there was only one concept of humanity that necessarily incorporated men and women as equal in essence; however, women were essentially the decisive players, both as symbols and makers of his nationalistic project for an independent India. Gandhi called upon what he considered were women's inherently superior qualities of self-control, and capacity of sacrifice and silent suffering to build not only his

[66] In Reference to the Manusmriti texts of law and social conduct. Smritis also includes the body of Hindu sacred literature passed on verbally from memory in the format of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

personification of nation but also his cause for *ahimsa* – non-violence –as the path to independence from colonial rule.

According to Lina Fruzzetti and Rosa Maria Perez "Gandhi's perspective of Indian women encompassed a syllogism: women represented, to a large extent, the symbol of the nation, of which the core was Hinduism, that is, India's tradition, therefore the nationalist project made women effective repositories of tradition" (Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002, pp. 41- 42). As such, the Nationalist movement was conspicuously femininely gendered; in which Gandhi took the lead in the "*feminization* of nationalist activity" (Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002, p. 42). Liberation of the motherland came to represent the protection of women's 'purity'; as such, by employing rhetoric that constructed the image of the Indian woman's pure and exceptional characteristics which are in turn bestowed upon the nation, fighting for liberation basically promoted the underlying significance of fighting for the purity of India. "With women's purity serving as the underlying signification for the cause of fighting for liberation, the nationalists' anti colonial movement took on an *Indianized* symbol through the *feminization* of land and political actions" (Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002, p. 42).

Undoubtedly, against the nationalist backdrop, the first clear women's movements and political involvements' concerns were first and foremost about the liberation of the nation. The gendered combination of the highest religious ideals and nationalism which drew upon connections and symbolisms involving figures such as the goddess Durga, and the mother goddess, with India as country and

land, effectively deified the earth as sacred mother/woman and land. This extremely particular construct of woman was by no means empowering, representing another form of nationalist construed patriarchy. As stated by Tanika Sarkar

> […] patriotism was subsumed within religion, the country became a vivid new deity added to the Hindu pantheon, and, by a sleigh of hand, became at once the highest deity from the moment of her deification: it is your image that we worship in the temples… (as cited in Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002, p. 42); (Taneja, 2005, p. 215).

Nonetheless, as Tanika Sarkar also points out, Gandhi successfully gained the approval and participation of even the most conservative, socially upper-caste families for his nonviolent struggle. Various scholars, – amongst them Vina Mazumdar (1927 – 2013), the polemic scholar academic, Madhu Kishwar (1951), founder of *Manushi*, as well as Devaki Jain (1933), scholar and feminist economist, winner of the 2006 *Padma Bhushan* government award for her contribution towards women's empowerment and social justice – have asserted that the Gandhian movement was a feminist movement in many aspects. They emphasise that Gandhi placed the utmost importance on respect for women's "personal dignity […] without belittling their roles as mothers and wives… [gave them]… equal tasks to perform in the achievement of freedom" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 180).

The fact that Gandhi was highly critical of degrading *'sexual attitudes'* towards women, that he reiteratedly emphasised that women were not "sexual playthings" but the "real foundation on which Indian society was built" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 180), in many ways offer weight to these arguments. Devaki Jain highlights Pandita Ramabai's call to woman for self-reliance and confidence, principles which the Gandhian movement upheld and also strongly promoted. Similarly, Madhu Kishwar asserts that while Gandhi was strategical in his application of the "traditional symbols of female power" (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 180), for his own nationalist ends, he also used the same strategy to appeal to women, pushing them towards empowerment through the recognition of their own strength and capabilities to be "self-conscious arbiters of their own destinies" (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 180).

Kishwar further highlights that even though in many aspects Gandhi was informed in his position on women by the ancient patriarchal bias of Hinduism, he asserted that women were superior to men in their capacity to practise *'Satyagraha'* – as in pacific or non-violent resistance – and as such "provided an unprecedented role for women in political work" (Hardiman, 2003, p. 117). David Hardiman cites one of the women in the movement as stating,

> Gandhiji's appeal was something elemental. At last, a woman was made to feel equal of man; that feeling dominated us all, educated and non – educated. […] no one single act could have done what Gandhiji did when he first called upon women to join and said: 'They are the better symbols of

> mankind. […]' All that puffed us up enormously and gave us a great deal of self-confidence (Hardiman, 2003, p. 116).

On the other hand, Sujata Patel, the Indian sociologist has argued that although Gandhi highlighted the concept of '*Shakti'* as in women's inherent strength and power, the Gandhian ideology was in its essence absolutely self-restraining in the scope of growth that it permitted women as far as involvement in activities that were outside the home, or connected to public spaces. The use of the *khadi* making spinning wheel on the Indian flag, as a symbol of women's participation in the regeneration of a new, pure and free India from the safety of their homes, is a particularly explicit example.

Sujata Patel outlines statements and writings by Gandhi that highlight specifically damaging assumptions regarding women; such as the specific gendered roles where women essentially thrive in the domestic space as carers, wives and mothers, which is also the argument put forward to explain their '*feminine'* qualities of self-sacrifice, purity, patience etc. that make her superior to men. The underlying message being that these are characteristics particularly suited to the homemaker. Carrying out activities for economic gain in Gandhian ideology was tantamount to soiling or violating the most 'precious and distinct feminine quality, purity and honour' (Patel, 1988, p. 381). The protection of women's honour and purity became embedded in the fight for freedom, as in the protection of the wealth and honour of the country.

The vow of *'Swadeshi'* as in home produced manufacturing is transposed from its originally political and economic roots into religious and moral concepts, where the practice of Swadeshi now refers to the protection of Indian womanhood, as in women's honour, which in turn becomes the protection of the nation as in *'Ishwarbhakti'* (Patel, 1988). Women and men all over the country willingly and wholeheartedly bought into these arguments that Gandhi so elegantly and convincingly articulated, using his mesmerising ability to enthral and his exceptional oratory talent. Gandhi limited the purpose of marriage to reproduction defining sexual intercourse without the purpose of reproduction as abnormal.

Thus, Gandhi successfully reconstructed the concept of honour and womanhood as per his understanding of what women should be; defined by their biological features, which in turn, he asserted, attribute them with the feminine qualities such as sensitivity and gentleness. These characteristics, originally defined as weaknesses, became what Gandhi now promoted as women's superior qualities. "The process of extraction, transformation and glorification of 'negative' attributes can be seen in the way he treats suffering, the most superior of all rights of women", (Patel, 1988, p. 381). The morally superior women, according to Gandhi, could no longer view herself as weak, she must eliminate the notion of being a 'weak creature' just as the goddesses "Sita and Draupadi[…]

filled the wicked with awe […] They cannot be weak if they have been mothers of sons, like Hanuman[67]"(as cited in Patel, 1988, p. 381).

Gandhi's philosophical and moral concept of strength in the practice of *Satyagraha,* as in non-violent resistance, was wholly developed on the premise of conversion of weakness to strength and this is precisely the construct that he uses to convert Indian women into nationalist icons representing the strength of the nation. Satyagraha is the only weapon available for the weaker entity or being, to fight against the stronger enemy opponent. Gandhi effectively uses Satyagraha for India's fight to overcome British colonial rule. This fight of the weaker against the stronger opponent can in fact only be successfully applied when the weaker group are able to convert their weakness into a stronger force as a strategy of overcoming the stronger force. As such, Gandhi employs the philosophies of *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* – as in non-violent resistance – to build his strategy of freedom from colonial rule incorporating the concepts of *Shakti,* as in the strength of womanhood in his plan. "The non-violent movement is to enable the weakest

[67] Hanuman is the Hindu god who presents in the form of a monkey, of strength and knowledge, protector and supreme destroyer of all evil. As the devoted follower of Lord Rama and known for his absolute celibacy, he is one of the main characters of the epic Ramayana; in his role as rescuer of Sita from Ravana, demonic king of Shri Lanka. In accordance with the Hindu scriptures, Sita's rescuer would necessarily have had to have been celibate so as to eliminate the possibility of her 'dishonour'.

human beings to vindicate their dignity […] she may be weak in body, but she can be strong in soul" (as cited in Patel, 1988, p. 381).

Sujata Patel points out that in many ways, Ghandi's ideas on women were continuations of the construct formulated by the nineteenth century reformers as regards the "urbanised middle-class upper-caste Hindu male's perception of what a woman should be" (Patel, 1988, p. 378). The concept of difference between sexes based on *natural differences* rooted in biology, as constructed by the 19th century reformers were not challenged by Gandhi. This construct served to justify the legitimisation of separate and different social and cultural roles for women, on the basis of which the correct morality and values of behaviour were construed. Sujata Patel asserts that Gandhi expanded the 19th century concepts by applying them to his nationalist agenda shaping his intentions regarding the role women would play in the freedom struggle. As such, the spinning wheel and the spinning of khadi was politicised as the instrument with which women from their homes participated in building the nation, even as "the morally superior woman became the symbol and conscience of the new nation-in-the-making. The woman as 'mother' who had 'innate', 'natural' capacities for 'wiseness'[sic], 'strength', 'courage', 'patience' and 'intuition' now becomes the symbol of the new political message and its strategy of non-violence" (Patel, 1988, p. 379).

Sujata Patel cites diverse speeches where Gandhi establishes the spinning wheel directly as representation of the chastity and honour of women, declaring that were the spinning wheel not used above other (foreign) methods of

production, “thousands of our poor sisters are giving themselves to a life of shame and degradation” (as cited in Patel, 1988, p. 381). Gandhi’s position on the gendered ‘complementary’ roles of men and women are amply demonstrated in his numerous speeches and writings upholding the concept that wise and good women were to be above all occupied in the care of her home and children.

His analogies to working women, with national degradation and loss of honour and purity were plentiful. “[…] when both husband and wife have to labour for mere maintenance, the nation becomes degraded. It is like a bankrupt living on his capital,” (as cited in Patel, 1988, p. 381). An analysis of Gandhi’s writings and speeches demonstrates his lack of ability to compare and understand the weakness of women in terms of oppression as he does the weakness of the Indian people in the context of colonialism. As such, though he was able to develop a strategy with which to overcome British rule, based on his understanding of the position of Indians as colonial subjects, he did not understand the similarities in readings as regards the women’s question, or the restriction of her autonomy economically and to the domestic domain. Gandhi simply absorbed the issues of dominance and oppression, as regards women’s questions into the discourse of nationalism.

Partha Chattergee has gone further and suggested that the issue of women’s emancipation was successfully transferred, through the Nationalist movement, from the purely political domain into the cultural and spiritual arenas (as cited in Dhingra, 2014). However, even as the nationalist movement was largely silent on

the women's question, organised women's groups continued to push for political rights and legislator reforms. Women also drew upon Gandhi's rhetoric creatively shaping it to link their arguments and demands for equality to the nationalist discourse; adapting and using the same arguments to press their point. Women experienced gender inequality in both the traditional social structures and the colonial structures; however, in the movement for independence, they aligned themselves with men as comrades in the nationalist movement, and were unwilling to place untoward emphasis on the issue of male supremacy arguments which could derail the fight for independence by offering the British justification for their continued rule in India.

Unfortunately, as scholars have argued, the focal point in the nationalist movement limited focus on women's problems and demands to only the political and education questions; ignoring completely the requirement to address questions of oppression embedded within family and social structures, a reality that affected the daily lives of the masses of Indian women (Dhingra, 2014). Although Gandhi's movement undoubtedly provided women with enormous visibility and a crucial role in the nationalist movement, changing significantly her image from the period of the socialist reform, it failed to adequately analyse or break the structural elements of exploitation and subjugation. In fact, despite the positive reconstructs of Indian womanhood and femininity, Gandhi's essentialist arguments more than reinforced the existing patriarchal structures that limited married women to the domestic sphere, – except in the case of serving the nation – and

denied their sexuality while simultaneously allocating the place of widowed women as being appropriate outside the home, in the service of *humanity*.

The Gandhian experiments and movement has led to numerous writings, praise as well as critiques regarding his contribution to women and their role in India and the world. The violence that women were subjected to during the process of partition of India and Pakistan, as well as Gandhi's apparent inability to separate the factors of religious tradition and understand the true issues of women's subjugation, his failing to break from the chains of tradition and advocate for women's emancipation have earned him accusations of male chauvinism, misogyny and other similar characteristics. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, in her article titled *To be pure or not to be: Gandhi, Women, and the Partition of India*, blames Gandhi's discourse focusing on the 'purity and moral' status of women as the perpetrator of the horrors of what she terms "a gender pathology" (Corazza, 2018, p. 5), to which men were subjected and women were victims during Partition. Mookerjea-Leonard asserts that Gandhi was unable to present an adequate political response to the crisis.

> By focusing on the moral or purity status of the victim, Gandhi, in his public statements, failed to draw attention to the issue [the partition] because of his own participation in the patriarchal logic at work in the mass violence against women at that time, (as cited in Corazza, 2018, p. 6).

Evidence and the passage of time have clearly shown that despite the new found self-confidence and pride that many women acquired through their very

active involvement in the nationalist movement, the patriarchal structures remained largely intact with little variance with the passage of time. Writing from a feminist perspective, Tanika Sarkar describes the unprecedented manner in which women participated in public protests during the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bengal. Women actively participated in processions, picketing establishments that didn't respect the homemade production, mandate, physically blockading roads with their bodies to prevent the passage of police vehicles. When men participating in passive demonstrations were arrested, women took over, actually leading and organising the movements. Women bore the brutal counter-reprisals from the police in the form of insults, molestations, and beatings; including in certain instances the firing of fire arms leading to the death of demonstrators. Sarkar states that

> The most crucial element in dovetailing the feminine role with nationalist politics was perhaps the image of Gandhi as a saint or even a religious deity and the patriotic struggle essentially a religious duty. […] The stress on the personal saintliness of Gandhi, a subtle symbiosis between the religious and the political in the nationalist message under his leadership, enabled nationalism to transcend the realm of politics and elevate itself to a religious domain (Sarkar T. , 1984, p. 98).

As women's imprisonment became a significant and important aspect of their participation in the nationalist cause against colonial rule, it also became an

important route towards personal fulfilment and empowerment, placing women in the eye of public visibility as never before. Geraldine Forbes cites the writings of a student leader, Manmohini Zutshi, arrested in 1930, in a publication she edited and introduced, where Zutshi states:

> We were excited and enthusiastic about being taken to prison. We felt as if a great honor had been conferred on us…In fact, the three of us, my sisters and I, dearly hoped to be imprisoned three times so we would be termed "habitual offenders (as cited in Forbes G., 2018, p. 22)[68].

Forbes highlights the fact that for many women, working towards the country's freedom gave them a voice and the opportunity to prove their bravery and commitment to the country, as being equal to and just as powerful as that of men. Forbes outlines how the true measure of what Gandhi was able to contribute to women is to be found in the oral histories, autobiographies and memoires that have been published since the period. Forbes also highlights how women acquired a sense of *self and self-worth* by joining the movement. She quotes a young widow she interviewed Ambabai, who had been arrested on several occasions stating that her days of political activism were the "happiest days of her life" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 24). Here Forbes provides us with inklings to the reality of the

[68] See: Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life, edited and introduced by Geraldine Forbes, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York 1994, p. 73.

experiences lived by women during the nationalist movement, even as Gandhi was unable or failed to address many of the true structures of patriarchy.

Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert recounts how women developed strong solidarity networks to counter the difficulties and monotony of confinement and imprisoning. These helped them not only to adjust to the major changes and upheavals that they were experiencing, but installed in them strength and determination alongside a nationalist consciousness. Women began to engage in creative writing activities, including poetry, as prison became a site where "identities were continuously shaped and restructured" (Thapar-Bjorkert, 1998, p. 583). Amongst one of the most important achievements of the period was the fact that the entry of women into spaces that were previously almost exclusively of male occupation

> […] dispelled the British stereotypes about Indian women as subordinate, weak and docile. Women were also aware that by endangering their womanhood on the streets and putting their bodies under risk of attack, they proved that they could share common experiences with their fellow men in the public sphere, (Thapar-Bjorkert, 1998, p. 583).

Geraldine Forbes further asserts that, Gandhi's reach also included women marginalized by middle-class society.

> Speaking passionately and often about child marriage and the plight of widows, he maintained there was "beauty in widowhood" and urged widows

> to devote their strength and souls "to the motherland". Although he emphasized sexual "purity," he held men to blame for women's transgressions and welcomed into the movement women who had been branded immoral. Visiting East Godavari District in 1921, Gandhi met with over 1,000 devadasis, women dedicated to the gods who practiced prostitution. Gandhi did not accept the work of devadasis or of prostitutes as legitimate labor but he did not condemn them. Instead, he blamed society and lustful men and suggested alternative employment. […] The Indian Constitution based on British and American principles, made women equal to men in matters of politics. This equality was not because a few women were part of the Constituent Assembly (six women out of a total of 299 members), but the result of years of making what Gandhi thought were the ills of Indian society – caste/class prejudice, communalism, and gender discrimination – integral to the platform of the Indian National Congress (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 24).

What is unquestionable is that many scholars, even while harshly critical of diverse aspects of Gandhi's ideology, as outlined previously, do indeed agree that his experiment with civil disobedience was fundamental in creating the foundation on which Indian women's political identity was construed as well as collaborations between western and Indian women. Gandhi had used the example of English suffragists who carried out hunger strikes to shape his own movement

which also used this form of resistance. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Sarojini Nadu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Hansa Mehta, and Vijaylakshmi Pandit were amongst the pioneer women born into elite homes with politically active fathers, who initiated the participation of other middle-class women in the nationalist movement. Here, Gandhi's presence and ideology were crucial in providing the guarantee, assurance and confidence necessary to the *guardians of woman,* which allowed them to become such significant players in the nationalist movement.

Women perceived themselves as being equal participants with equal opportunities in the non-violent struggle to freedom As such, this initial nationalist women's movement in India, has been projected as being fundamentally different to the women's movements in western countries, where women were seen to have antagonistic and conflicting issues in their fight for equality while competing with men (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006). The ideology of non-competitive mutual collaboration towards the nationalist cause was echoed in the press and magazines. The implicit argument was that the nationalist movement was a

> mutually supportive and non-antagonistic venture between men and women, […] women would not undertake nationalist activities without the consent of the men [...] non-antagonism was not associated with passivity or reticence on the part of women, […] women's activities were applauded and glorified (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, p. 45).

The following decade witnessed what has been described as "hordes of women pouring out of their homes. Women of all classes and castes, high and low, gave their support to the national movement. […] their persuasive appeals for swadeshi are even today marvelled at" (as cited in Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, p. 45). Geraldine Forbes asserts that Gandhi embraced women's issues with his combined messages, positioning them as crucial to seeking the country's freedom as well as his non-violent strategy that elevated self-suffering, endurance and daily domestic routines above masculine violence. "Women were part of every aspect of the movement, including the destruction of property in 1942," (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 22).

The women participating in the nationalist movement with Gandhi hailed not only from "different ideological subgroups on the Indian political scene" (Maty, Ness, & Cope, 2016, p. 969), but from every possible point of heterogeneity. Geraldine Forbes points out that Gandhi's followers included not only the "respectable few brave women" (as cited in Maty et al., 2016, p. 969), willing to participate in non-co-operation activities, but Tamil prostitutes, as well as national leaders like Sarojini Naidu who had been active participants in the Congress activities since 1904, and other women who attended specifically in order to organise and co-ordinate processions, demonstrations, picketing and spinning activities. The movement also saw the presence of women who had been very active in campaigns for rights from the period of the socialist movement; who continued to follow up so as to witness the advancement of their work in the

social, legal and political status of women. There were also those women "who responded to their dual duty – to their beloved Gandhi … and to their guardians … [and who] generally followed men" (Forbes, 1997, p. 83; as cited in Maty et al., 2016, p. 969).

Then there were the peasants and working class women, mothers and wives who did not join the public scenes of agitations due to diverse impediments, but also felt deeply involved by the part they played in maintaining their families and taking on responsibilities, while the men members of the family were away in prison or got killed. Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert carried out a study of autobiographies and oral interviews that testify to the fact that women who did not cross the threshold of their homes felt no less involved in the nationalist agitations as they carried out the domestic chores and tasks of caring for their in-laws and children or other members of the family with a renewed awareness of nationalist purpose. Even though many of these women lived in highly constrained conditions due to the segregated character of social customs, Suruchi Thapar states that

> […] for these women the domestic sphere emerged a site of both contestation and subordination. […] entire households […] were affected by the political turmoil, and women had to resolve the conflict and contradictions that any form of nationalist activities created for them. The awareness that they had to survive without inhibiting their husbands'

commitment to the nationalist cause helped in the development of their own political consciousness (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, pp. 209-210).

Although there is clear discontent, from the feminist point of view, in Gandhi's traditional discourse regarding the gendered duties of men and women; there is also recognition amongst feminist scholars of the key role that Gandhi played in actively involving and bringing uncountable numbers of women out of their homes and into the open through the nationalist movement. His part in making widowhood and non-marriage respectable options, his particular point of focus on the equality of men and women, as well as his insistence on holding men accountable for transgressions against women; thereby holding them to the same moral standards as women unarguable put him on par with many feminists of that particular historical period.

A significant detail worth noting is that despite the revolutionary changes that women were experiencing as regards the spaces that they could occupy and their roles as members of the nationalist movement; as well as the undoubted knowledge that they were not fighting only for the freedom of the nation, the usage of the term '*feminist'* has been largely rejected by Indian women. Many of the famous educated women who had led the women's movement in the nationalist struggle were quick to reject the label, pointing out that "Indian women sought political rights in order to perform their civil duties, and not to compete with men (Chattopadhyay, as cited in Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, p. 45). Forbes asserts that

women perceived their own progress and India's freedom as closely knit issues where "women's rights seemed dependent on freedom from imperialism[…] They saw themselves (women) as working for women's rights when they demonstrated or supported revolutionary activities" (as cited in Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, p. 45).

Alisha Dhingra affirms that the Nationalist movement led to numerous women's organisations being created around the country, some of which were at a pan-India scale, with different branches in different areas. At the beginning, these organisations focused on campaigns for education and the right to vote and contest elections; by the 1930s they had augmented their demands to include personal law reforms. As a result, in 1941 a committee was appointed to draft the *Hindu Code Bill* (Dhingra, 2014). The campaigns for women's rights, and women's organisations, according to Sadhna Arya, were primarily concerned with the problems that affected all women from all communities. They also had a very clear-cut understanding of the issue of financial security; as such, they focused particularly on campaigns to enact laws that would mandate equal property rights for men and women. Arya highlights that women's organisations sought, through their campaigns, for laws that would provide a measure of empowerment for women getting them a step closer to "gender equality and financial security"(as cited in Dhingra, 2014, p. 37) .

Nevertheless, there are many scholars who argue that the newly established India, post-independence did not uphold women's expectations of equal rights and progressive legislation. This is a fact that is quite visible to the observant eye

when travelling around India. Women were encouraged to participate in the anti-colonial struggle as a tactical necessity, but once national independence was achieved, their status remained largely unchanged. The women's question "is subsumed by the nationalist agenda, women's traditional roles and images are unchanged after independence and they retreat back to their homes without any changes to their self-perception" (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, p. 261). It is understood then that although women sacrificed their own claims for equality, believing that their demands would be dealt with after independence, they were failed by the subsequent post-independence governments, who did little or nothing to fulfil their promises of supporting and advancing the questions of women's rights.

Tanika Sarkar asserts that from a feminist point of view the Gandhian movement that constructed the freedom movement on religious and traditional pillars using the concept of feminine power as in *Shakti*, and non-violence constructs that permitted the entry of women in the movement, never actually intended to challenge the institution of patriarchy. "Nationalists rarely sought a permanent reversal of the customary role of women in and outside political action," (Sarkar T. , Politics and women in Bengal, 1984, p. 101).

David Hardiman highlights the difficulties and barriers he encountered when trying to interview peasant women of the nationalist movement for his book. He was unable to interview or gain access to many of these women who had been prominent players in the nationalist struggle but were now hidden behind the walls of their homes; while the men of the household firmly declared that they could

recount all that was there to be told. On the rare occasion when a women was summoned to the front room in order to clarify points in the already established conversation, Hardiman expresses his consternation thus, “while I and the males sat on chairs, the women normally sat on the ground, their heads covered in the presence of the patriarchs, speaking hesitantly and with inhibition” (Hardiman, 2003, p. 119). Hardiman further clarifies that only on very rare occasions was he able to gather any “worthwhile testimony through such means” (Hardiman, 2003, p. 119). The circumstances described by Hardiman, which can be clearly observed when travelling through rural areas of India, and even in the cities, necessarily bring us to the conclusion that in spite of women’s massive participation in the *freedom struggle*, power relationships in most Indian households remain largely unaltered over seventy years after independence.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri points out that the stories of feminism in India echo the very uneven characteristics of the country in its diversity, size and inequalities. The only aspect that ties these elements together is the common colonial past. Indian feminist writings have likewise been necessarily intersectional; expressing results of what have been, according to Chaudhuri, reasonably progressive legislation and policies, but likewise, uneven, in their implications across class, caste, region and gender (Chaudhuri, 2012).

The India-Pakistan post-independence partition resulted in unprecedented turmoil and upheaval leading to unimaginable violence between people who had lived together for generations. Families were shattered while millions perished

sending shockwaves throughout both countries. Chaudhuri points out that this in itself caused the women's question to retreat from the centre of discourse even as a Committee for Abducted Women was created to *return* abducted women to the nation to which they belonged, Pakistan or India. Feminist scholars have studied the unhappy, largely tragic accounts of the process, providing testimonies to the newly established state's cruel and ruthless treatment of women whose voices and wishes were violently overruled and ignored as state and nation decisions took priority.[69]

It would seem that despite the apparent acceptance of gender equality in the full-blown period of the nationalist movement, following independence feminism movements declined with women's political rights largely being ignored, according to the County Report for the *Beijing Women's Conference* (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2012). Women were once again understood to be outside the formal workforce as wives, mothers and daughter. "[…] while women have often been in the forefront in mass movements, their presence has not been felt strongly in structured decisionmaking [sic] and institutions" (Country Report, 1995, p. 67) (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2012, para. 32).

Scholars have put this state of affairs down to diverse reasons. Some consider it was a "lull after independence" or the "natural return to patriarchal

[69] See: The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India by Urvashi Butalia and Borders and Boundaries, Women in India's Partition by Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin.

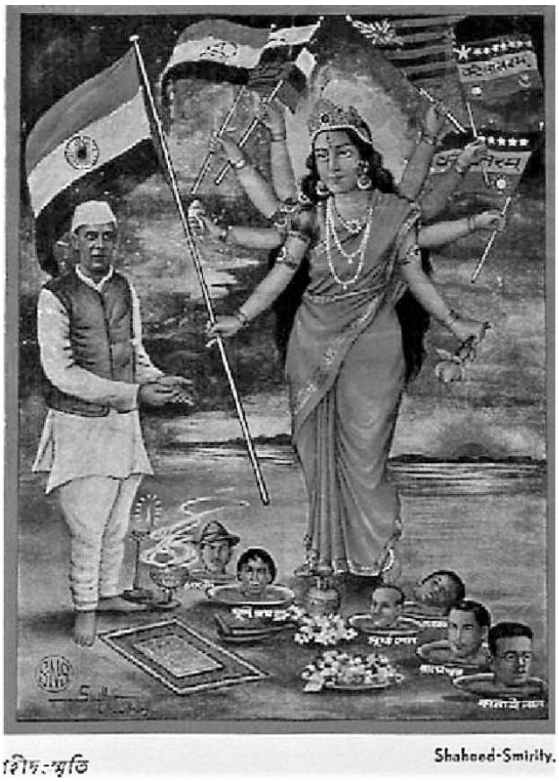
everyday norms" (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2012, para. 32). Other theories are that the upheaval and shock of partition left little room for feminism after independence. In any case, as Chaudhuri asserts, the nationalist feminism movement laid down the foundations for the second wave of the women's movement which started sometime in the mid-1970s.

(2.2.3) FIGURE - 39 A & B

A – Rup Kishor Kapur, (c.1940). *Shaheed Bhagat Singh*. Published by Rising Art Cottage, Calcutta. He was a revolutionary who made two violent strikes against the British leading to his execution at the age of 23 and conversion into a popular folk hero of the independence movement. (Pinney, 2004, p. 126).
Retrieved from:
https://www.academia.edu/37861100/The_Printed_Image_and_Political_Struggle_in_India

B – K.K. Rajaram, (c.1962). Untitled. Source: *Bharat Mata: India's Freedom Movement in Popular Art*, Neumayer and Schelberger (2008, p. 148). Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, (2008), [book cover]. Publisher: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India.
Online source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/KK-Rajaram-Untitled-c-1962-Source-Neumayer-and-Schelberger-2008-p-148_fig8_263156251

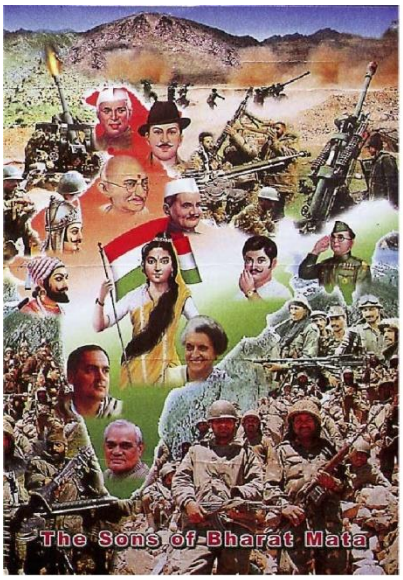
The four lions in the image are the lions of the national emblem of India as a republic, symbolically adapted on January 26 1950 from the 250 BC Lion Capital of Ashoka; currently housed in the Sarnath Museum near Varanasi. The emblem is titled: *Satyameva Jayate*, part of an ancient mantra meaning 'Truth Alone Triumphs' and can be found on all Indian currency bills and official documents. The four lions that stand back to back in the emblem – only three are visible from a frontal view – represent power, courage, confidence, and pride.



(2.2.3) FIGURE - 40 A & B

A – Sudhir Chowdhury, (late 1940s). *Shaheed Smirity*. "The sacrifices of slaughtered revolutionaries permit Nehru to receive Mother India's blessing" (Pinney, 2004, p. 137). The heads of the fallen lie on the ground around the goddess. Online source: https://www.academia.edu/37861100/The_Printed_Image_and_Political_Struggle_in_India

B – Mochan, (late 1940s). *Mata ka Bandhan*. Rising Art Cottage, Calcutta. Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-1945) accepts *Bhavani's* sword reflecting a mythological imagery in which the 17th century warrior king, Shivaji of the Maratha empire received the same sword. Nehru is also visible kneeling on the right (Pinney, 2004, p. 138). Online source: https://www.academia.edu/37861100/The_Printed_Image_and_Political_Struggle_in_India



(2.2.3) FIGURE - 41 A & B

A – *The sons of Bharat Mata*, (1999) [laminated print] publisher unknown, (Pinney, 2004, p. 208). Online source: https://www.academia.edu/37861100/The_Printed_Image_and_Political_Struggle_in_India.

B – *Mother India breaks her chains*, (c.1947). "Mother India shows her delight as Nehru in the foreground raises the flag of an Independent India" (Pinney, 2004, p. 146). Online source: https://www.academia.edu/37861100/The_Printed_Image_and_Political_Struggle_in_India.

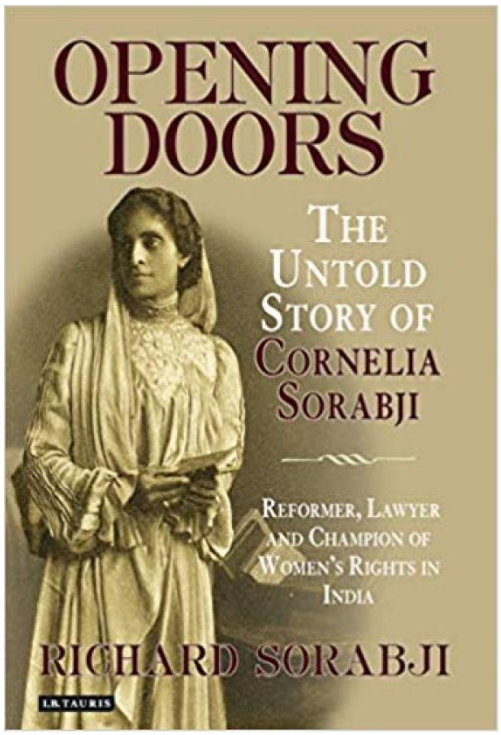
2.2.4 SAROJINI NAIDU –NEE CHATTOPADHYAY, – (1879 – 1949)

As a poet, writer, orator, nationalist and feminist, Sarojini Naidu (1879 – 1949) has been hailed as "the most celebrated woman in India during her lifetime". (Lokuge, 2013, p. 115). *'Nightingale of India'* as she was often called, due to her extraordinary lyrical and oratory skills, Sarojini Naidu was fortunate to be born into the then small group of *Westernized* families who were also *western educated* and thus, more than willing to take on board the progressive socialist reformers proposals regarding the *New Indian Woman.* They were as such amongst the first of a "new Indian middle class" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 115). Naidu was the daughter of the Bengali lyrics composer and singer Varada Sundari and the distinguished scientist and Urdu, Bengali poet, Dr Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, who himself was the son of progressive Hindu Brahmin family and had studied at *Edinburgh University* and *Bonn* in Germany. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was also the founder of the reputable *Nizam College* in Hyderabad. As Chandani Lokuge states,

> Sarojini and her siblings were brought up in a home open to outside influences that fuse ideas of nationalism, internationalism and transnational patriotism. Such multiple integrated circuitry developed in Sarojini a love of 'world-citizenship' – a commitment to cross-cultural and cross-racial

integration – that she would carry with her to Britain (Lokuge, 2013, p. 116).

It is evident that Sarojini Naidu benefitted from one of the most liberal educations of the time, one that immersed her from early childhood in both Indian and western cultural influences; which only a small percentage of women from the upper middle-class families of the period were privileged to enjoy. Born in Hyderabad to a European educated father who was amongst the pioneers of educational reform, Naidu was exposed from a young age to "emancipatory discourse of women's rights", (Snaith, 2014, p. 81). Others like her were the poet and writer, Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862–1894) and political activist, lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954). See: (2.2.4) FIGURE - 42. Tempting as it would be to delve further into these forerunners, one must resist lest this thesis never see an end. Cornelia Sorabji, amongst others, will certainly make for a study in the future. A single data would be the fact that famously, Cornelia Sorabji was the first woman to graduate from *Bombay University* as well as the first Indian woman to graduate from a British university, in this case *Oxford University*. Oxford did not issue her with a formal degree until 1922, three decades after she had graduated, which is when Oxford University began issuing degree certificates to women (Barron, 2017).



(2.2.4) FIGURE - 42 A & B

A – Cornelia Sorabji, Book cover of *Opening Doors: The Untold Story of Cornelia Sorabji, Reformer, Lawyer and Champion of Women's Rights in India*. By Richard Sorabji, (2010), I B Tauris & Co Ltd. Possible date of the photograph is 1892, when Sorabji graduated, becoming the first Indian woman to take the Bachelor of Civil Laws exam at Oxford University, although she wasn't awarded the qualification by the university until 1922. Retrieved from: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Opening-Doors-Cornelia-Reformer-Champion/dp/1848853750

B – Cornelia Sorabji, (date unknown). Retrieved from: https://www.livehistoryindia.com/herstory/2017/07/27/cornelias-fight-

Sarojini Naidu's political and literary expressions were influenced by "eastern and western traditions, lofty idealism, deep subjectivity and subtle expediency" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 115). She was able to correspond and meet with

some of the most eminent British and Indian politicians and intellectuals, including, Rabindranath Tagore, Edmund Gosse, W. B. Yeats, Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) – founder and first governor-general of independent Pakistan; he worked closely and shared a troubled but deep friendship, despite differences, with Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, – as well as Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu began experimenting in English poetry and Persian drama writing when she was about twelve. Her multiculturalism and multilingualism were defining elements in shaping her outlook as well as important assets with which she negotiated both cultural and political situations in her career. Anna Snaith states that

> The intellectual environment into which Naidu was born, then, is a product of cross-cultural contact. To this can be traced her particular commitment to a discourse of human rights, social justice and the nation state, as well as her use of English in her poetry and the majority of her political speeches and the eclecticism of her literary influences (Snaith, 2014, p. 81) .

Chandani Lokuge states that there were three important ideals that shaped Sarojini Naidu's political and poetical careers, "[…] Romanticism, internationalism and overriding both, the deepest of patriotism" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 117). When she was sixteen, her parents attempted to end her romantic relationship with Dr Govindarajulu Naidu – who was considered as belonging to an inappropriate caste – by sending Sarojini to study in England. However, the relationship with Govindarajulu Naidu continued through letter correspondence

during the four years that she stayed in England. On her return Sarojini was to marry him, – most likely following an important spate of disruptive family discussions – thus demonstrating the first of the "nascent radicalism" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 117), that accompanied her during her career.

The exposure that Sarojini Naidu encountered during her stay in England undoubtedly was decisive in shaping especially her literary career which would later also shape her political rhetoric. She was to benefit from contact with the "literary luminaries whose work she so venerated" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 117). She was guided by her encounters with Yeats, Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons who played particularly important roles in moulding and mentoring her as the "young fanciful and impressionable poet" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 117) that she was at the time. During her first stay in England, she lived in London and attended lectures in Kings College, publishing her first writings in the college magazine. Apparently, her initial poetry was a disappointment to her mentor Edmund Gosse who was to "advise her to restructure herself as a 'genuine Indian poet of the Deccan, not a clever machine-made imitator of the English classics" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 117); so as to show the west what he thought would be the *heart of India.*

Naidu would appear to have taken Gosee's suggestions on-board, going on to write verses informed by Indian subjects and themes which however maintained a distinctively British literary style. Scholars have suggested that Sarojini Naidu

played into the desires of her London male literati's orientalist wishes to construct in Naidu their western perceptions of the *'East',* so as to further her own artistic and political agenda; understanding clearly that this would be the most efficient way in which to get her work published in London. In her first poetry publications, *The Golden Threshold (1905)* and *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring (1912)*; the picture of her on the frontispiece of the two collections, a drawing by J.B. Yeats – W.B. Yeats father –, presents the viewer with an image of Naidu posed and dressed in a "distinctly western style" (Reddy S. , 2010, p. 571). According to Reddy, the blurred lines and scarce distinction of her Indian origin in the drawings of the volumes appear also to reflect the ambiguity of her position at the time, as neither completely Indian not English. See: (2.2.4) FIGURE - 43.

The second volume on the other hand, *The Bird of Time,* which is a collection of more clearly nationalist poetry, appears to contain a double significance. This volume also includes a photograph of Naidu on a black and white background and dressed in Indian garments and jewels. Sheshalatha Reddy presents us with the suggestion that "the juxtaposition […] against a black and white background constructs for her readers the inscription of both gender and race" (Reddy S. , 2010). While her Indian outfit and jewellery provide clear indications of her identity as an Indian woman, providing her Indian readers with the nationalism which she increasingly embraced, for her English readers Sarojini performs and presents the equally sought after face of *exoticism.*

(2.2.4) FIGURE - 43 A, B & C

A – *Sarojini Naidu: Her Way With Words*. (2012), Niyogi Books. Book cover showing a young Naidu; edited and introduced by Mushirul Hasan, The actual date of the photograph is not specified although it is possibly 1913 or slightly later. Retrieved from: https://www.exoticindiaart.com/book/details/sarojini-naidu-her-way-with-words-NAK076/

B – Sarojini Naidu, (2 January 1929), San Francisco, California, USA. Photograph: © Bettmann Corbis. Source: India Congress. Retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/indiacongress/9769457261

C – Sarojini Naidu, (1912), New York: John Lane Company London: William Heinemann. From the frontispiece of *The Bird of Time, Songs of Life, Death & the Spring*, by Sarojini Naidu, (1912). Retrieved from: https://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/book_archive/196174216674_10151149982251675.pdf https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sarojini-Naidu/images-videos#/media/1/401841/234486

The relationship Naidu maintained with the English literati mentioned previously has been determined by some scholars, such as Makarand Paranjape, as an essentially hierarchical ‘colonial relationship’ where Gosse was the “kind

patron directing the young Naidu's creativity while she, the colonial subject 'cringed' before him, humbly accepting his authoritative direction" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 119). However, as Chandani Lokuge states, Paranjape's interpretation may be asserted as consistent only as far as Naidu's education and upbringing grounded in the intricate understandings of tradition and modernity in a cross cultural context take place. It does not take into account the traditional teacher and disciple *guru and shishya* relationship which Naidu clearly looked up to, as can be clearly evidenced in her lectures that praised the deeply ingrained Indian custom of vocational teaching. "The vocation of the teacher is touched with a sacrosanct quality… The personal relations of the teacher with the pupil, of the guru with the disciple… I am a product of that education," (Naidu, as cited in Lokuge, 2013, p. 119).

Chandani Lokuge asserts that the same philosophy informed Naidu's politicized relationships with Mohandas Gandhi and other nationalist leaders. Naidu justified the veneration that she bore for her *men leaders* on the basis of the *guru-bhakti* relationship of devotion, obedience and reverence towards a spiritual leader, which in Hindu culture blesses and sanctifies the disciple. Lokuge states that Naidu's intentions were to present an alternative, subversive reading to the "narrow and oppositional binaries of stereotypical colonizer-colonised relations" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 119). As such, in 1911 Naidu wrote to William Heinemann – the founder of Heinemann publishing in London,

> "[…] after all I am out am out and out a Hindu in spirit in spite of all your Western independence …reverence and obedience to one's parent and ones teachers are essential. Mr Gosse is my literary godfather, so I must… as his sanction before giving a book to the world even under your sheltering wing" (as cited in Lokuge, 2013, p. 119).

Sarojini Naidu's intent to adapt western and eastern discourses to her agenda using the mythological imagery propagated of Indian women to the west, earned her a fair share of criticism. She has been accused of failing to portray an authentic image of India and as such failing to be a "true interpreter of India to the West" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 120). She has also been criticised for creating an alternative western invention of what is Indian, – "the East as seen by the West", (Lokuge, 2013, p. 120) – an invention which was easily validated by her position as, "an eastern woman writing from the perspective of the West" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 120). Chandani Lokuge considers the problem to be more complex and suggests that Naidu used these predictable stereotypes as a strategy with which to provoke a subtle process of deconstruction which would show up in her future political rhetoric.

It would seem that Sarojini Naidu might initially have sought to break down the belittling imperialist narratives that portrayed Indian women as the *hapless victims of primitive Indian patriarchy*; images that were constructed and served up for western consumption. Ample studies have brought up examples of

such portrayals of the *white man's burden*, as can be seen, for example, in Edward Said's study regarding the ideology of orientalism working with imperialism to establish a hegemonic strategy of a lost and glorious past, alongside stories of *the downtrodden, native Indian woman, backward and in dire need of protection.* These narratives were of course vital in serving the political agenda of the empire.[70] Towards this purpose, Naidu demonstrated an attempt to challenge what she perceived as the "humiliation to which the so-called 'Indian women' were constantly subjected through persistent orientalist perceptions" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 121) using her particular brand of subtle activism which focused on the positive aspects of India.

By the early 1900s, Sarojini Naidu began to get more and more involved in the national upheavals that were occurring in the country, coming under the influence of those who Lokuge has penned as her "next gurus: Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Mohandas Gandhi" (Lokuge, 2013, p. 125). In 1904 she attended her first session of Congress. Here she was able to meet for the first time, well-known nationalist leaders, as well as Ramabai Ranade, who was amongst the veterans working on women's education policies (Forbes G. , 1988). Sarojini Naidu was familiar with the writings of the great patriots of India, having been exposed to the Congress branch established by her father in Hyderabad. She was requested to

[70] See: (Bhattacharyya, 2009)

recite her poem *Ode to India*; while her 'fiery speech' in the congress meeting of 1906 "so impressed Gokhale that he urged her to dedicate her life to the country" (Forbes G. , 1988, p. 62).

Gokhale, senior leader of the National congress party convinced her to participate actively in the call of the nation. The following year, she again gave a speech in Congress. 1908 saw the twenty second session of the *Indian National Congress*; Sarojini Naidu proposed reform resolutions for the improvement of conditions for Hindu widows, and the provision of educational options through which widows could reinvent themselves into respected and contributing members of society (Forbes G. , 1988, p. 62). She advocated for establishments such as *Karve's Home,* – mentioned earlier in this study – pushing her point using her brilliant oratory talents. Condemning the situation of women as a "degrading cancer" she asked how there could be political freedom when the country continued to suffer from such an ailment. Forbes asserts that by 1908, Sarojini Naidu was "clearly established as a forceful public speaker who linked the cause of India's freedom with the need to improve women's status" (Forbes G. , 1988, p. 63).

Soon after, in 1914, she met Gandhi in London for the first time. Gandhi and Naidu had many things in common as 'citizens of the world' as well as colonial Indians. Gandhi's legal background as well as his experiences with Britain and South Africa made him an astute politician capable of negotiating the multiple cultural positions to serve the political outcomes he sought for India.

Sarojini Naidu was soon influenced and drawn into his circle, into "a long and loyal discipleship with him […] a relationship which never wavered for a single hour through more than thirty years of common service in the cause of India's freedom", (Lokuge, 2013, p. 125). Over the years, Sarojini Naidu wrote numerous letters to Gandhi which offer evidence of the closeness of their relationship; letters that she sighed off with *much love*.

> Her political mission was to champion Gandhi's principles for *swadeshi*, *swaraj* and issues bound up with them – Indian women's emancipation and Hindu–Muslim unity. Without directly denouncing her western side and influences, she proudly gave predominance, now, to the Indian. 'I am the child of two civilizations, the hybrid of two civilizations, I went to the Ganges … and there I remembered that I was indeed the child of the Vedic spirit.' Clearly, inspired by the vision of Gokhale and Gandhi, her love for India first vented in her poetry was now re-activated and subtly translated into an increasingly explicit political consciousness (Lokuge, 2013, pp. 125-126) . See: (2.2.4) FIGURE - 44.

(2.2.4) FIGURE - 44 A & B

A – Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu during the *Salt March* in Gujarat, western India, (March 1930). Hulton Archive.
Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/event/Salt-March

B – George Rinhart Corbis (n.d.). Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu, (September 12, 1931); walking from the station at Boulogne, northern France, to the dock from where he boarded the channel steamer for Folkestone in Kent, Southeast London. ©Photograph by George Rinhart Corbis.
Retrieved from: https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/gandhi-jayanti-iconic-photos-mahatma/#s-cust0

Sarojini Naidu was to be amongst the most important women players in the nationalist freedom movement. She described herself as the "loyal daughter of *Bharat Mata*[71] whose task was to set her mother's house in order, (as cited in Snaith, 2014, p. 81). Antoinette Burton states that Naidu "consolidated that *traditional* idiom and refigured it as a new subject of public political discourse (as cited in Snaith, 2014, p. 81). As such, the problematic conversion of women into

[71] Literal translation: Mother India.

political beings as agents who are categorised as the *true essence of the nation*, as we have seen previously, was also what informed Naidu's discourse, underwriting as Partha Chattergee stated, "the modernisation of women as part of a broader regeneration of the nation" (as cited in Snaith, 2014, p. 81), but also limiting modernisation as per the supposed authentic traditions.

Naidu used Gandhi's feminist nationalist agenda to travel around the country, advocating for reforms using a diverse range of cultural influences informed by her extraordinary education and knowledge of not only the Indian and British heritage, but also including but not limited to Greek and Roman history, literature, culture and politics. As Chandani Lokuge asserts, "Her oratory was multifaceted, enriched by her love and knowledge of many cultures," (Lokuge, 2013, p. 126). Naidu's biographer Padmini Sengupta states that, "in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the position of women was anything but happy, Sarojini, with her brilliant oratory and poetry, caused a stir and upheaval which resounded throughout India" (as cited in Lokuge, 2013, p. 126).

Lokuge highlights a lecture that Naidu gave in 1906 at a *Theistic Conference* in Calcutta, titled *'Personal Element in Spiritual Life'*. For her lecture, Sarojini Naidu

> […] drew on Plato and Napoleon, quoted from the Rubaiyat by the Persian poet, Omar Khayyam, and touched on the scriptures of the Hindus, Zoroastrians, Christians, Mohammedans and Buddhists. Her delivery, meanwhile, was as fluid as it was deeply emotional and persuasive. To

> ‘prolonged and enthusiastic cheers’, applause and ovation, she became a leader of women, promoting reforms and women’s franchise (Lokuge, 2013, p. 126).

Over the years, Naidu was to become an advocate for educational, social and political rights for women as the leader of organisations, becoming the first Indian woman to be President and the second woman, after Annie Besant of the *National Congress* in 1925, as well as the first woman governor of an Indian state, Uttar Pradesh, in 1947. She was also one of the founders, alongside Margaret Cousins, and later President of the previously mentioned, *Women’s Indian Association*, (WIA), (Snaith, 2014). She became fully committed to Gandhi’s non-cooperation movements and suffered arrest and imprisonment on at least four occasions. From her speeches and as a political leader, it is evident that Sarojini Naidu put her literary talent into the construction of some of the most memorable speeches and political rhetoric. Chandani Lokuge states that Sarojini Naidu was also a woman of exceptional charisma and personality, her presence attracted men and women of all ages. According to Lokuge,

> Naidu’s political rhetoric displayed a daring feminist stance. The feminism she projected had substantial appeal in India because it was based on local realities rather than western ideology. She […] projected a reform movement that was home-grown and to which India could relate (Lokuge, 2013, p. 128).

Naidu constructed a 'new woman' connected to her roots and a clear descendent of the heroines of past epics and mythology. She asserted that as descendants of the glorious heroines, women needed to learn to demonstrate and project their valor and characteristics outside their homes and family environments into the larger space of the nation. At the time when she was the president of the *Indian National Congress*, Naidu developed a model of discourse in which the nation was referred to as *the home* or *the house*, the Indian people made up *the joint family* and the Indian woman was *the Mother*. "Women had to use their talents to put the national 'house' in order, reconcile the tragic quarrels between joint family members, and find a place on the 'home' for all the children and foster-children", (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 530). This discourse was to seize the imagination and inspire the whole country. It was to become an ideology that every Indian man and woman would hold on to, for better or for worse. It became a metaphor that would ingrain itself into the psyche of the people for generations to come. As such, the concepts above continue to inform cultural and social practices, easily visible in many aspects of contemporary society and culture, such as in media and film.

Sarojini Naidu's particular feminism is evident in the way in which she faithfully adapted into her discourse – possibly more convincingly than him – Gandhi's diverse concepts of womanhood, for example in his promotion of *Sita* as the ideal role model. However, the problematic issues of Gandhi's form of

feminism which focused on creating perfect nationalist freedom fighters, wives and mothers, as brought up in the previous chapters, equally applies in the case of Naidu, who from all records followed Gandhian philosophy to the letter. An excerpt from one of Naidu's speech demonstrates this clearly problematic stance.

> Let the womanhood of the country wake and work. Let us strengthen the hands of our men … We ask only that we may be given that chance to develop our body and spirit and mind in that evolution that will re-establish for you ideal womanhood … but an ideal womanhood that will make noble wives who are helpmates, strong mothers, braver mothers, teaching their sons their first lesson of national service (Lokuge, 2013, pp. 128-129).

In any case, one cannot but acquiesce to the fact that Sarojini Naidu made a unique contribution to both the struggle of the Indian nation and the cause of womanhood, as an anti-imperialist nationalist feminist. In 1931 she travelled to London with Gandhi to attend a *Second Round Table Conference*, as the representative of Indian women, while Gandhi represented the Indian National Congress. By then she was something of an international icon. She had, not so long ago, completed a trip around North America in representation of Indian women; and also, in part, to counteract the damage caused by Katherine Mayo's infamously imperialist *Mother India*, which due to the depraved image it constructed of Indian men and society was highly detrimental to the cause of self-rule for India. Sarojini Naidu, "as the exemplar of a 'civilising' progressive

womanhood, countered these charges implicitly and explicitly in an international lecture tour" (Snaith, 2014, p. 67).

Anna Snaith highlights that Sarojini Naidu's Bengali Brahmin background and her reformist political position opened up many doors offering her access to the most important people and connections in London at the time. While she was there for the Round Table Conference, Naidu's schedule included, amongst numerous other events, receptions at Buckingham Palace, India House, the Friends Meeting House and 10 Downing Street. She was invited to participate in both literary and political events which were held specifically in her honour. She was also requested to preside over a PEN international dinner reception and to read at the Poetry Bookshop, at King's College London and at Girton College, Cambridge. Anna Snaith further asserts that

> […]. The guest list for her farewell party in the Lyceum Club ballroom exceeded two hundred, and was reported in *The Times* (14 December 1931). By the 1930s she had become the embodiment of Indian womanhood, non-threatening in her self-presentation, but insistent in her demands for an independent Indian nation centred on women's equality and participation in public life (Snaith, 2014, p. 67).

Sarojini Naidu was amongst the 75000 people who carried out the famous 24-day salt march to *Dandi* in Gujarat, against the abusive taxes and British salt laws. See: (2.2.4) FIGURE - 44 A & B. Soon after the Dandi march Gandhi was

arrested, Sarojini Naidu then led 25000 protestors who included numerous women to a raid of the *Dharasana Salt Works,* also in Gujarat. Naidu used her own public and high profile position to exemplify what she sought to communicate to the world as India's progressive stance. Although her views were clearly subjective, as seen in a 1947 speech where she stated that "India has always honoured woman" (as cited in Snaith, 2014, p. 80); we can infer that Naidu used this as a strategy to provoke the change she sought; by referring back to the supposed historical *golden age* period, to which many early reformers and the nationalist discourse allude, in claiming the existence of an age where Indian women were highly empowered.

As Snaith suggests, it is reasonable to conclude that Naidu used this pragmatic tactic to resolve the possible or potential oppositions to her presence as a public figure, as well as to justify and demonstrate that the demands she was making for women's social and political equality were not alien to Indian society. Validating Naidu's rhetorical discourse in her well-known book titled *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood,* originally published in 1922; Margaret Cousins states of Sarojini Naidu, what appears to have been at the time a widely held view, according to Anna Snaith.

> Sarojini is a unique link between the great heroines of the past and the free and clever and wise womanhood of the future Bharatavarsha. She proves to

> us that the tales of the virtues of Savitri, Damayanti, Padmini, and Mirabai[72] are no exaggerations, for she also has shown self-determination, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, self-expression equal to theirs nut in a modern setting (as cited in Snaith, 2014, p. 80).

Sarojini Naidu also provided an important example of the intertwined connections of Indian feminism and the international aspects of feminism of the period. As we have seen, she travelled to attend conferences and to speak publicly about their campaign as well as women's suffrage, alongside other Indian women. Snaith states that "Naidu […] was by no means anomalous in London campaigning for voting rights for Indian women *alongside* a British sisterhood" (Snaith, 2014, p. 85). On a previous visit she "had given a series of interviews about Indian women's suffrage, situating herself clearly within an international women's movement but simultaneously underlining her ability to speak for herself and the particular needs of her countrywomen" (Snaith, 2014, p. 85). Naidu attended the 1920 *International Women's Suffrage Alliance* in Geneva in 1920, as one of the first Indian delegates. She is said to have "revolutionised the false ideas of many concerning the conditions and capacity of Indian woman" (Margaret Cousins, as cited in Snaith, 2014, p. 85).

[72] These are names of goddesses and heroines in Hindu mythology.

Chandani Lokuge states that

> The multifaceted strategies Naidu employed in her numerous political campaigns, her promotion of women's emancipation and Hindu-Muslim unity, whether spontaneous or expedient inspired a large number of Indians, whether at home or abroad. As such, Naidu herself was to gain iconic status by the end of her career as the personification of India in the role of symbolic Mother; powerful, compelling and revered. While Gandhi gave her the name of Bharat Kokila (Nightingale of India) as much for her poetic voice as for her political eloquence, Nehru, sensitive himself to the power of literary discourse, observed astutely how she constantly 'infused artistry and poetry into the national struggle' (Lokuge, 2013, p. 131).

Chiara Corazza has stated that although Sarojini Naidu rejected the term feminist, never considering herself as one and distancing herself from feminism in the west, she nevertheless "dedicated her entire life to the enhancement of the status of Indian women" (Corazza, 2018, p. 48). There is no question regarding the fact that Sarojini Naidu's role for women as the new nation builders included an absolute rejection of the traditional customs that were real barriers to preparing women to be participants in their roles as torchbearers and builders of the new renaissance nation. As such, child marriage, seclusion and limitations on education bore no place in these new aspirations. As Forbes points out,

> Sarojini's generation had advanced far beyond the first women who cried out against seclusion. For the women of the 1920s and 1930s it was clear that freedom from restrictive customs would make it possible for them to contribute to the regeneration of India, (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 530).

Although Sarojini Naidu worked alongside other women leaders to eliminate detrimental social customs which prevented women from access to equal rights, education and development, to securing the vote as well as the passing of progressive legislation for women; there were some specific issues that were cause for conflicts between the nationalist cause and women's cause. While the right to vote, to education, to improved conditions for women and protective legislation for women workers in general, and mine and factory workers in particular, were areas that, by the 1920s, had gained consensus amongst the majority of politicians; the issues of child marriage, property rights for women and the family, and the usage of *purdah* remained unresolved, continuing to create and receive divided responses.

Forbes asserts that while the majority of modernists were clear regarding their opposition of child marriage, some nationalists as well as many Muslims and Hindu conservatives did not agree with government intervention in what were considered as religious affairs. "Marriage law, which included age of marriage, remained under the authority of the religious texts of each specific religion," (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 530). The AIWC and WIA had always been vocal in their

opposition to child marriage as detrimental not only to women's education but clearly also to her health. As such, they celebrated the introduction of the *Hindu Child Marriage Bill* in 1927 and the previously mentioned *Child Marriage Restraint Act*, in 1929, which became applicable to all religious communities; believing that they had removed one of the major barriers to women's progress. However, as Forbes points out, the years that followed demonstrated that "they ought not to have been so sanguine about the efficacy of legislation" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 530).

Purdah and seclusion turned out to be areas of greater and long lasting discord. Women had often used the metaphor of a caged bird to describe the condition of seclusion, irrespective of the luxury of the homes within which they might have found themselves. However, following the periods of reform, women started travelling to meetings and making speeches while observing *purdah*. They made use of the *Burqah or Burqa* – an over the clothes garment that covers the whole body and face usually with a narrow net across the eyes to provide for minimal vision – and the women's compartments in public transport or closed carriages in specific transport, as they saw necessary; asserting that the use of *purdah* was a conscious choice and decision, made for religious and / or social reasons.

The ambiguity of the issue resulted in many 'not real' demands to abolish purdah as many women seemed to state that they chose to observe purdah. Separate women's compartments and areas on trains and buses remain the norm to

date and government schools were established in order to permit for girls to observe strict purdah. As such, members of Indian women's organisations even while attacking the system of purdah as

> […] inhibiting female education […] worked for separated schools for girls […] demanded women's hospitals and asked for separate women's compartments on trains and buses. […] they urged the government to provide schools for girls where strict purdah could be maintained (by sending covered carriages to pick up girls, providing covered entrances, surrounding the school with high walls, and vigorously excluding any males from the grounds), to provide for purdah hospitals and to set up purdah parks (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 531).

Thus, although they did not condone purdah they did not seek to abolish it either. Over time, the question of purdah became a dividing issue between Hindu and Muslim women. Although both religions mandated purdah for modesty, stating that women be under the 'guardianship' of men; progressive modernist voices of both religions denied the existence of religious advocations for purdah. The Hindus made reference to the so called 'Golden Age' of women with no limitations of freedom and the Muslims declared that in the time of Mohamed there were no veils or restrictions on women's movements (Forbes G. , 1982).

Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968), also a pioneering feminist, "a practising doctor and ardent women's rights advocate" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 531) declared

that the custom of purdah was the fallout of an outdated custom from the days of warfare and constant armed conflicts. She accused men of enforcing the custom into modern times for their own interests, to feed their senses of superiority by justification of women as 'temptress' and lacking in intelligence (as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 531). Unfortunately, Reddy's analysis was not bought into; instead, each side created their own version of the story. Hindu feminists accused the Muslim invaders as being to blame for a custom that they supposedly introduced in India, while Muslim feminists stated that although the Koran discussed modesty, "Indian-style purdah" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 531) did not originate from Islam. As such, what had been a feminist problem in the nineteenth century became and increasingly polarising debate; by the third decade of the twentieth century Hindu feminists insisted on their version of the 'Golden Age' of Indian women, prior to the Muslim invasion, while Muslim feminists became more and more protective of what was perceived as a threat to their identity. Meanwhile, the actual custom of purdah was never effectively attacked.

2.2.5 SWARNAKUMARI DEVI (1855-1932), SARALA DEVI (1872-1945) AND BEGUM ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN (1880-1932)

In her seminal book titled *Early Feminists in Colonial India*, Bharati Ray, professor of History and Founder Director of the *Women's Studies Research Centre* at Calcutta University, offers us a poignant portrait of two pioneering women feminist thinkers and political activists. In the midst of billowing nationalism, they were amongst those who were crucial influences in shaping the early movements for women's rights in pre-independent India. In her introduction, Bharati Ray describes one of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's preliminary public appearances, in the *Indian National Congress* session, on December 26 1901. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (1872-1945) was conducting a chorus rehearsal of a patriotic song she had specifically written for the purpose, with fifty girls from different regions in India. She was to make newspaper headlines as "SING HINDUSTAN […] that great lady, Miss Sarala Ghosal" (her maiden surname), (as cited in Ray, 2002, p. 1). Sarala Devi Chaudhurani started her political and activist journey through her music as a means by which to, as Ray states, "inspire a nation that was in deep slumber" (Ray B. , 2002, p. 1). It is this natural and innate passion to inspire and arouse that informed Sarala Devi's work in politics and feminism.

A few years later, in 1905, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), who had received no formal education offered her husband a draft manuscript of a pioneering text that was to become "one of the earliest depictions of a feminist utopia" (Anam, 2011). Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain were true contemporaries; however, their childhood and formative years were vastly different, due to the cultural differences of the family backgrounds in which the grew up. Both of them worked towards the improvement of women's conditions and status in twentieth century colonial Bengal, however, their approach to the issues they faced differed significantly, as they employed the tools that were available to them, each one shaping their ideology on the particular socio-political and cultural contexts of the historical period in which they lived. There were similarities in their background but the cultural contexts which shaped their work were vastly different. Sarala Devi and Begum Rokeya were both born in relatively wealthy, middle-class, land owning Bengali families; Sarala Devi hailed from the extremely privileged, highly progressive Brahmo Hindu Tagore family; – her mother was Rabindranath Tagore's sister. Sarala Ghosal was Rabindranath Tagore's niece; as such, she hailed from unarguably one of the most illustrious families, not only in Bengal but all of India. The ancestral Tagore home in the neighbourhood of Jorasanko, in north Kolkata, is known to have been a major cultural and creative centre where some of the greatest minds assembled to discuss and debate their creative ponderings and new ideas. The Tagore home

was also a place where eastern and western philosophies found a common meeting point, and complimentary space to share.

Begum Rokeya, on the other hand was the daughter of an orthodox, albeit highly educated Muslim. A brief examination of how Sarala Devi and Begum Rokeya, two outstanding women, negotiated their agenda for the advancement of women in the contexts of the culturally contradictory backgrounds they were born into is what I attempt to present herewith. An examination of Sarala Devi's truly extraordinary mother, Swarnakumari Devi is also appropriate, considering that despite her pioneering contributions, she has been largely ignored by scholars compared to her daughter Sarala; and also, in order to establish the context of the distinguished Tagore family background as part of the backdrop to feminism in Gandhi's nationalist movement.

2.2.5.1 SWARNAKUMARI DEVI (1855-1932)

Teresa Hubel states,

> Today Swarnakumari Devi's name is rarely, if ever, mentioned in nationalist histories and even in feminist histories she usually occupies a secondary position, behind her daughter Sarala Devi. And, as the few literary scholars who have written about her have observed, it is difficult to find any of her English novels or short stories in India or in the West, (Hubel, 2011, p. 170)

Sarala Ghosal's mother Swarnakumari Devi was Rabindranath Tagore's elder sister, and was herself an outstanding and talented writer of some reputation. The Tagore family were known to be liberal and progressive in their concept of education, including as concerned their daughters and wives. They provided their daughters with rigorous home tutoring; Swarnakumari became one of the earliest women writers of acclaim in Bengal. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita describe her as "novelist, poet, playwright, songwriter, and journalist, […]; one of the most distinguished literary figures of the time, and a torchbearer in the tradition of women's writings in Bengal" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 235). Anurupa Devi (1882-1942), another well-known Bengali scholar stated that

> The advent of Swarnakumari on the literary scene of Bengal heralded a new era for women. Many women had written poems and stories before her, but these were looked upon patronisingly. She was the first writer to show up the strengths of women's writings and raise women's creations to a position of respect (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 235).

However, it must also be noted that as Teresa Hubel asserts, unfortunately, Swarnakumari's "family connections as much as her sex got in the way of her posterity" (Hubel, 2011, p. 168). Hubel highlights Swarnakumari's pioneering achievements as "a woman writing first in Bengali and later in English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" (Hubel, 2011, p. 169). Susie Tharu and K. Lalita assert that while she was alive Swarnakumari's novels were as popular as those of the eminent writer poet, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Tharu & Lalita, 1991), who composed the song *"Bande Mataram"* – Hail to thee, mother, – (2018), which would later become the national anthem which personified India as the mother goddess, in verse. Tharu and Lalita lament the very real danger of Swarnakumari's excellent and distinguished work being lost to history. They highlight the irony of the fact that Swarnakumari's brother Rabindranath Tagore has been honoured with a whole publishing house set up and dedicated exclusively to preserving and reprinting his work; while not a single effort has been put into conserving or upholding his brilliant sister's singular pieces, many of which are

set in the midst of the major reform movements that made up the unique history of the period in which she lived.

However, Swarnakumari Devi, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's mother and Rabindranath Tagore's elder sister was in every way one of the pioneering women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Her publications included novels, stories, essays, plays and the first Bengali opera. She initially wrote in Bengali, but later also in English (Hubel, 2011). Swarnakumari wrote her first novel titled '*Dipnirman' – The Snuffing Out of the Light* –; a socio-historical piece. She later wrote a trilogy '*Rajkanya Jyotirmayee'* in which the main character was a woman similar to her daughter Sarala Devi, who set up organisations and volunteer groups to serve the welfare of the nation. Swarnakumari had a son as well, but it was her daughter Sarala who she specifically tutored towards serving the country. The majority of her books revolved around themes of patriotism and women were the central characters in her narratives, actively involved in shaping the dream of one nation (Mondol, 2018).

In 1870, the novel titled '*Dipnirban' – The Snuffing Out of the Light* – by an anonymous writer was widely acclaimed for its unique character and quality in the genre of Bengali literature. Eventually, "it became known that the accomplished writer was a young Hindu lady" as cited in the Hindu Patriot (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 236). The Calcutta Review offered the following unstilted review, "We have no hesitation in pronouncing this book to be by far the best that

has yet been written by a Bengali lady, and we should no more hesitate to call it one of the ablest in the whole literature of Bengal" (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 236). Still without knowledge of who the author was, Swarnakumari's brother, Satyendranath who reviewed the novel admitted to finding it difficult to believe that it was authored by a woman, however, he conceded that it was "a novel of unprecedented merit […]. I feel greatly excited to find that a Bengali woman is capable of writing a novel of such artistic merit. The erudition, style and sincerity are hard to find in Bengali literature; in fact they would be difficult to find in other cultures also (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 236). This was the first of several novels and short stories which were to become extremely popular amongst readers. In 1879, Swarnakumari published what is considered to be the first opera written in Bengali, titled *Basanta Ustav – Spring Festival* – (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 237). Rabindranath Tagore's popular opera *Balmiki Protiba – Balmiki's Genius* – was composed after Swarnakumari's piece. Records demonstrate that it was Swarnakumari who first employed the writing forms in the opera as well as her short stories which her younger brother, Rabindranath would later learn from her. She wrote the series of long philosophical poems titled *Gatha* well before him, and in fact, her first book of poems was dedicated to him, with ironical foresight as to what was to follow in the future.

To my younger brother.
Let me present these poems: carefully
gleaned and strung

> To the most deserving person.
> But you are so playful. I hope you will not
> Snap and scatter these flowers for fun (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 237).

The poem expresses Swarnakumari Devi's tenderness as well as her apprehension towards her younger brother who was to become the legendary Rabindranath Tagore. Some scholars have highlighted the similarities in style and technique, even in the titles, that Rabindranath's work has to his elder sister who was very likely a model to follow for the young Rabindranath. However, his attitude to his elder sister was far from generous. In 1914, shortly after a translation of Swarnakumari's novel *Kahake – The Unfinished Song* – had been published, Rabindranath wrote the following letter of his sister Swarnakumari, to his friend, William Rothenstein, the Jewish artist, art critic and poet.

> She is one of those unfortunate beings who has more ambition than ability. But just enough talent to keep her alive for a short period. Her weakness has been taken advantage of by some unscrupulous literary agents in London and she has had stories translated and published. I have given her no encouragement but have not been successful in making her see things in the proper light (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 238).

Nevertheless, Swarnakumari Devi's book was very well received in England and within a year a second edition was published. It would be difficult to establish whether, by doing a time line progression analysis, Swarnakumari Devi's writing would be up to the same standards of her famous younger brother "whose mature work places him among the most distinguished of twentieth-century writers in India" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 238). Nevertheless, one cannot help but pose the question about how Swarnakumari might have shone had she received the support and encouragement that she so unquestionably deserved.

For over thirty years Swarnakumari Devi was also the sole editor of the reputable journal *Bharati*, founded by her older brother, Jyotirindranath Tagore. The first editorial board had included Rabindranath, but later on she was to bear the full responsibility. *Bharti*, as in motherland, was a literary magazine in which Bengali writers published their work and also expressed their discontent with the systems of cooperation they found between British imperialism and Indian patriarchy (Hubel, 2011). Swarnakumari Devi saw the publication as a means by which to promote movements on political issues. As such, there was a specific column for discussions around contemporary issues of politics and state news. Here news about the sad state of Bengal, the persecution of the Begum of Bhopal, the Burmese war, the war between Serbia and Bulgaria, the problems between India and the Burmese border, home rule and labour agitations in England, the oppression of women tea workers in Assam and many other stories of unlawful

acts, inhuman politics and oppression, alongside the activities of the colonial state became regular features (Mondol, 2018).

Tharu and Lalita state that although the journal was mainly a literary magazine, not a single aspect of Bengali life or culture was left out from featuring in it. Leading thinkers and activists, including many women writers presented their writings in Bharati, and Swarnakumari "made it a matter of editorial policy to give priority to popular articles on science" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 237), as a way in which to provide scientific news and information to non-English speaking women. Perhaps this is the most forgotten or ignored contribution made by Swarnakumari Devi; her efforts to promote the learning of science amongst the general population of late nineteenth century Bengal. She wrote extraordinary essays that strove to overcome the relatively narrow concerns of education, especially as regarded women's education, in order to advocate for the necessity of a science curriculum that would help create a population cultured in scientific knowledge. Science was not a part of the educational curriculum for children or women and Swarnakumari Devi's writings argued the cause for knowledge of science. She provided compelling and lucid arguments about the advantages and necessity of science as a means to dispel with superstition, as well as the often dangerous, non-scientific acts and beliefs that were rife amongst the masses (Mandal, 2005-2006).

According to Madhumati Mandal, Swarnakumari took the lead, publishing articles on complex theories and topics, using simple language that would be easy

for women who were minimally educated to understand. Swarnakumari saw science as a way forward for India, not only for economic growth but also for the 'regeneration' of the population. "She was amongst the first people to coin Bengali names for the new scientific concepts", (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 237). She wrote a total of 24 scientific essays out of which 17 were published in Bharti. Her first scientific study titled *Bhugarva – Centre of the Earth* – ventured into an area that apparently no one else had entered, until then (Mandal, 2005-2006). The piece compiled and explained the theories behind the work of seven world geologists. Madhumati Mandal states that her essays were logically reasoned and explained making them easy to comprehend even by those without any sort of formal scientific knowledge or base.

She also successfully wrote about complex Physics theories as regards astronomy; exploring areas that proved quite challenging considering her lack of access to the mathematical aids that would have made the task more straightforward (Mandal, 2005-2006). Madhumati Mandal asserts that the contribution that Swarnakumari Devi made towards popularising science, especially amongst women, as well as her efforts to analyse and present new findings have been woefully ignored by the whole community of scholars, especially as an assessment of her contributions to the historical period that she occupied. Swarnakumari Devi was far ahead of her time. She analysed ancient Indian texts on science through the lenses of western scientific knowledge, always acknowledging the contributions of the occident as well as scientists like Newton.

Swarnakumari stated that the "scientific mind can drive any kind of superstition away… Until, we, the Indians can understand the necessity of scientific education, there will be no progress at all" (as cited in Mandal, 2005-2006, p. 1213).

Apart from being the first woman editor of a major publication, and the achievements listed previously, in 1889, Swarnakumari Devi was an attendee amongst other women, including Pandita Ramabai, and Ramabai Ranade of the fourth session of congress in Bombay (Mondol, 2018) – "all of whom would distinguish themselves as educationalists and social reformers – (Das, 2007, p. 27). *The Indian National Congress* had been established in 1885 with the political objective of "a movement of National Renaissance under both men and women united" (Neogi, 1985). Women were only allowed to join the Congress sessions as a result of the persistent efforts of Dwarakanath Ganguly (1844-1898), another fervent reformer and champion of women's rights of the time. In 1890, Swarnakumari Devi became the first woman delegate, – alongside Dwarakanath's wife, Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923), – of the Indian National Congress sessions in Calcutta.

In 1886, Swarnakumari established the *Sakhi Samiti* – 'women friends' club – which aimed to encourage and inspire women to join in the national cause while also serving as a focal point for widows and women from all classes and castes, who for some reason or other had been marginalised or were in need of assistance. She was also the president of the *Bidhapa Shilpashram* – 'Widow Centre for Arts and Crafts', – that organised annual arts and crafts fairs displaying and selling

cottage industry products produced by women from all over the country (Ray B. , 2002). Fairs and exhibitions were organised to coincide with the National Congress sessions leading to the initiation of the first programmes of the promotion of Indian arts and crafts as in *swadeshi arts* (Mondol, 2018). It is presumed that these were also amongst the first steps that led to the future programmes which promoted the empowerment and recognition of vernacular artists and the arts of different regions of the country.

Swarnakumari Devi took an interest in Theosophy, the European anti-materialist philosophy that accepted religious diversity and emphasized Hindu spirituality, to which Annie Besant was to become an ardent follower. She set up the first Theosophical society in India for women of all religions as way in which to promote the idea of developing Indian culture with the option of enrichment but not domination by the west. Her focus was to promote a mixture of progressive reforms alongside traditional values (Rowbotham, 1992). The Theosophical society was to attract many foreigners and especially Irish women, amongst them Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, who as we have seen previously would become strong supporters and participants not only of the Indian nationalist movement, but also the campaigns to forward women's questions of education, healthcare and other issues that were major debating points of the period.

2.2.5.2 SARALA DEVI (1872-1945)

When Swarnakumari Devi's husband travelled to England, she went back to stay in her father's family home. As such, her daughter, Sarala spent most of her childhood in the company of some of the most brilliant and creative intellectuals of the time. As Bharati Ray states, "there were perhaps few Bengalis who could claim to have contributed as much to the cultural efflorescence in contemporary Bengal as members of the Tagore family did" (Ray B. , 2002, p. 5). In fact, *Thakurbari*, as the Tagore family home was called was considered the official meeting place of intellectuals of the nineteenth century, where

> […]not only were there animated discussions on social, political and scientific subjects, and a prolific flow of creative writings, but quite often plays were staged and enacted by members of the family themselves. […] The women of the Tagore family proved to be the vanguard of women's 'progress' and education […] there was a galaxy of brilliant women (Ray B. , 2002, p. 5).

As such, Sarala Ghoshal grew up in the most privileged company of creative intellectuals and cultural excellence. Sarala Devi Ghoshal (Chaudhurani) studied at the elite *Bethune school and College*, an affiliate of the University of Calcutta and the oldest college in Asia. It was considered to be the "centre of

learning for the girls from 'progressive' families, (Ray, Karlekar, & Ray, 2010, p. 8). Sarala was thus amongst the very first generation of Bengali women to attend formal schooling and institutional education outside the home. In her introduction to *The Many Worlds of Sarala Devi,* Bharati Ray highlights the two major developments that enveloped the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, so as to contextualise the historical period in which Sarala lived. First of all, the period saw an enormous explosion of cultural activity that encompassed all spheres of the creative arts. Secondly, social reforms that specifically affected women were introduced and education for women was established "after a gap of several centuries" (Ray, Karlekar, & Ray, 2010, p. 3). As Ray asserts, the early social reformers could never have imagined or anticipated the enormous impact of education on women's lives and indeed on the whole of society. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani had the grand privilege of being born and growing up in the midst of both the cultural and political centres of this explosion.

Swarnakumari Devi left her daughter, Sarala Devi with the reigns of the initial foundations of an all India woman's organisation, which she would establish as the – *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* (BSM) (The Great Circle of Indian Women) – the first of its kind, which was formed, led and made for women, exclusively by women, (Ray B. , 2002). When male reformers opposed the BSM, as being an unnecessary organisation, Sarala Devi stood up to the men, accusing them of only *pretending* to be champions of women's rights, when in fact, they sought to maintain control over women's liberties, discussions and actions

(Forbes G. , 1982). Opposed to the seclusion of women, Sarala Devi made concrete efforts to encourage BSM to develop what she saw as a *sisterhood* of "an endless number of energetic women ready to work to improve the condition of women" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 528).

In the first BSM meeting held in Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, in 1910, the decision was taken to tackle the issue of access to education specifically for women who were restricted by purdah; as such, as stated earlier, education within the *zenana* – women's quarters of traditional homes – was provided, as a way of respecting the norms of "female modesty" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 528). As a highly educated and publicly visible woman, although Sarala Devi was particularly opposed to what were the clearly crippling customs of zenana and purdah, she did however consider that education within its confines was preferable to no access whatsoever, and that segregation of boys and girls could also have beneficial aspects. As such, these also provided the option of valid justification of women's only organisations and women's definitions of women's problems. In a time when it was still considered highly improper for *'respectable'* women to work outside their homes, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani overcame intense family opposition and went to work as the assistant headmistress at a girls' school in Mysore. However, she only remained for a year before returning to Calcutta and taking over from her mother alongside her elder sister Hironmoyee Devi, as editor of *Bharati*. There have been diverse speculations amongst scholars as to why she

didn't continue in the post; and many have alleged to unwanted attention she received and the risk of sexual assault or molestation.

Sarala Devi is known to have been amongst the most faithful and ardent supporters of Gandhi's radical, *swadeshi* and mother-centred nationalism. She started actively participating in the movement soon after the agitations over the partition of Bengal in 1905, the first steps that led to the formation of what is Bangladesh today. The swadeshi movement was instrumental in bringing about important, what were arguably even radical "transformations in cultural practices" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 171). Thus began a period of nationalist activism where, to start off with, all foreign goods and more especially textiles were boycotted. The swadeshi activists, following Gandhi's calling, soon expanding their movement to include rejection of western education or usage of western systems in government institutions like schools, colleges and courts. All foreign made products were rejected for use, including items like jewellery and kitchen utensils. Sarala Devi was amongst Gandhi's chief supports in the bid to encourage women to wear *khadi* – the homespun cloth, – which in its origins was rather coarse and tactilely unpleasant, to say the least. She actively campaigned and encouraged women, vocally and by example, to not only wear *khadi*, but urging them also to learn to spin the *chakra* – the spinning wheel used to make homespun cotton.

The relationship between Gandhi and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, who at the age of thirty-three married a widower, the nationalist Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhary, has received much speculation. It has formed an important part of the theme of a

number of serious as well as suggestively speculative publications; including newspaper articles and no less the recently published book, *Gandhi, The Years That Changed the World, from 1914 to 1948,* by the eminent Indian historian Ramachandra Guha. Unquestionably, when Gandhi got to know Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, he was very taken by her and apparently suffered from severe bouts of crisis of conscience and personal conflicts caused possibly by his vow of *'Bhramacharya'* – abstention in word, deed and thought from desire and/or pleasure, in particular sexual – as well as the fact that both he and Sarala Devi were married.

A series of letters written in the 1920s bear witness to Gandhi's increasing infatuation for Sarala Devi, dazzled as he was by her personality, independent character and gifted oratory and musical talent. He was, according to Forbes, "delighted she could help him make khadi fashionable and impressed by her ability to move crowds with words and music" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 19). There have been a number of studies on Gandhi and his relationships with women, both Indian and foreigners, specifically in the context of his opinions and personal experiments with *'Bhramacharya'*. According to Dr Vinay Lal, *University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA),* professor of History and Asian American Studies, Gandhi did not believe in avoiding desire, but in controlling and overpowering it (as cited in Forbes, 2018).

Gandhi's image of powerful women was constructed on the models of the goddesses of Hinduism, the legendary heroines who were "pure firm and self-

controlled" (as cited in Forbes, 2018, p. 19). He made this clear in his writings and the *Bhagini Samaj* organisation speech in 1918, where he denounced what he termed as the "blemishes in the Shastras" (as cited in Forbes, 2018, p. 19) in the form of child marriages, enforced widowhood and restrictions on women which converted them into subordinate members of society. In his speech, Gandhi advocated the creation of strong women and imagined these women as the leaders who would "have authority in society and erase the impression left by erroneous *Smritis* (as cited in Forbes, 2018, p. 19).

To Gandhi, Sarala Devi epitomised in person his concept of perfect womanhood embodying all the characteristics of the legendary heroines, Sita, Draupadi and the other Hindu goddesses. Geraldine Forbes cites a particular letter that Gandhi wrote to Rambhuj, Sarala Devi's husband, where he called her the greatest *Shakti* while visualising and writing about her as "becoming one with India in heart and soul" (as cited in Forbes, 2018, p. 19). Gandhi first met Sarala Devi in 1901 during the *Indian National Congress* session, mentioned previously, on December 26, where she dazzled her listeners with her chorus recital of a patriotic song she had composed. However, it was in 1919 that Gandhi and Sarala Devi actually got to know each other, while she hosted him in her home in Lahore during his visit for a congress investigation into a massacre that had taken place.

The letters they exchanged after his visit tell of "a deepening relationship" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20) as Gandhi gradually changed his way of addressing her and expressed his feelings, alternately calling her his "spiritual wife" (as cited in

Forbes, 2018, p. 20), while denominating his letters as "love letters" (as cited in Forbes, 2018, p. 20). At other times he referred to himself as "her brother" (as cited in Forbes, 2018, p. 20). From all indications, as Gandhi and Sarala Devi travelled around India to promote *Khadi* and the pledge of *Swadeshi*, his emotions for Sarala Devi must have generated much internal turmoil in him. Geraldine Forbes states that he admired Sarala Devi's public persona and possibly imagined that "a merger with her might bring him closer to winning all of India to *Satyagraha*" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20). Sarala Devi was the only woman Gandhi met who, according to his image of the ideal woman, "embodied the characteristics needed to lead woman and at the same time, could cause men to rethink their ideas about women" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20).

Records of the episode of Gandhi's relationship with Sarala Devi indicate unanimously that it did not progress beyond the platonic, despite the clear undertones of physical and emotional desire indicating quite possible a non-platonic attraction and longing. Many historians state that it was Gandhi who finally terminated communication with Sarala Devi, especially after objections from his son and other relatives as regarded the closeness and nature of the relationship.[73] However, Geraldine Forbes who has carried out detailed studies on

[73] See: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/books/review/ramachandra-guha-gandhi.html

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Sarala Devi Chaudhurani has suggested that it was she who gradually tired of Gandhi's domineering attitude of *Law Giver* and *Master,* in his intent through continuous instructions to 'cultivate and perfect' her. "Personally attracted to Saraladevi, who was cultured, extroverted, intellectual, politically active, and attractive, Gandhi tried shaping her to become his ideal female leader" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20). Forbes states that Gandhi tried to convince Sarala Devi to give up her lavish life style and marriage to dedicate herself to the cause (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20). By 1920 she had tired of his 'lectures' which she found increasingly annoying as she felt they had changed her as she sought to fit his expectations. A couple of years later, her husband Rambhuj died and she returned to Bengal to dedicate herself to "writing, girls' education, feminist politics and spiritual discipline" (Forbes G. , 2018, p. 20).

Sarala Devi participated vocally and actively in the *swadeshi* movement, galvanising participation and followers using her exceptional oratory and musical talent. She addressed groups and organisations, propagating the *swadeshi* message through discussions, speeches, songs and publications in the Bharti journal. At the same time, Sarala Devi also travelled throughout northern India, setting up branches of the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal (BSM)* – The Large Circle of Indian

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Thomas Weber, Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women, 2011. Ramachandra Guha, Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914-1948, 2018; Joseph Lelyveld, Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India, 2012.

Women – established by her mother Swarnakumari Devi, "to bring together women of every race, creed, class and party… on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the women of India" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 70); with the purpose of promoting women's rights, the study of history and science, the mastering of regional languages and preserving historical memory (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). BSM established branches in at least eleven different cities, including Lahore in today's Pakistan. During this period of the Sarala Devi was also the head manager of the *Hindustan Press* in Lahore; she acquired a total of six printing machines in order to ensure that the printing if subversive publications would not be affected by possible government confiscatory orders.

The Swadeshi movement gained increasing force under a steadily growing number of supporters and promoters quickly acquiring the force and traits of militant revolutionary nationalism. The argument for swadeshi that Gandhi had promoted, regarding economic autonomy and self-sufficiency for India was in contestation of the economic stronghold the British held over produce and goods which permitted them to be sold at highly inflated prices. The concept of swadeshi was almost romantic in its arguments of overthrowing a foreign governing force through self-sufficiency and home grown and produced products. As a result, large groups of the population were convinced to completely stop buying foreign products.

As inevitably occurs when overtly simplified solutions are applied to complex problems, the population were quick to grab hold of the seductive

propaganda of swadeshi, while absolutely failing to take into account the terrible losses that the boycott of foreign products caused small traders to suffer. Most of these losses were incurred by small Muslim businesses that were harassed and forced by groups and picketers into "burning their stocks of British goods in a highly spectacularised, ritualistic manner" (Mukhopadhya, 2013, p. para. 4). The boycott was the beginning of an insidious and disturbing turn of events leading to the rampant rise in aggressive anticolonial politics and nationalism.

Sarala Devi used the *Bharati* journal to organise campaigns to encourage young men to take up sportive activities that would enhance their physical strength and physique; as a means in which to contest the racist colonial discourse propagating stereotypes of weak, effeminate Hindu and Bengali men. This was part of the common colonial discourse attributing the Hindu male with racist belittling adjectives to describe their character and physique as part of the justification for the necessity of colonial rule. As such, Sarala Devi organised campaigns of physical training activities to train young men convincing them that they should be ready to protect their women from harassment from British soldiers during demonstrations and other activities necessary for the nationalist movement.

She made people pledge that they would be willing to sacrifice their lives for freedom and independence of the country. Similarly to Gandhi, or perhaps learning from him, Sarala Devi was well aware of the power of rituals and symbolism; she made her followers place their hands on maps of India as they vowed to serve and sacrifice everything for independence and the country. She

tied the traditional thread, *Rakhee,* around the wrists of the men as they took their vows, calling upon the symbolism of the ancient festival of *Raksha Bandhan* – as in the bond of protection –, an annual celebration when sisters tie *rakhees* around their brother's wrists offering them blessings and protection during combat with enemy forces or life itself. Sarala Devi was able to gather a relatively large following of people who were trained in exercises of defensive action, fencing, jiu-jitsu, wrestling and boxing (Kumar R. , 1993). At about the same time, between 1904 and 1905, Sarala Devi organised parades around the dates of major calendar festivals for young men to compete and display their skills and physical prowess; coinciding also with the opening of an academy in martial arts in Calcutta. She founded festivals like *Birastami Utsav,* – the festival of heroes –, establishing it on the second day of the major annual *Durga Puja,* celebrated in September or October, in reverence of the warrior goddess Durga.

While actively involved in organising movements and nationalist demonstrations, Sarala Devi did not give up her intense work in the areas of the demands for women's rights. She challenged male colleagues regarding what she considered their hypocrisy as regards the women's question, accusing them of patronising women. She stated that although the men "advertised themselves as champions of the weaker sex, equal opportunities for women, female education and female emancipation" (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 70); in fact they "lived in the shade of Manu" (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 70); and were unwilling to allow women true liberty. Sarala Devi continued to work closely with women in BSM,

most of who were women who had previous experience working in male dominated organisations, albeit and on projects that were characteristic of the ideas of the male social reformers. Although an ardent follower and champion of Gandhian values, Sarala Devi continued to fight franchise and civil rights issues for women. Forbes states that the participation of women in agitational nationalist politics and the practice of *satyagrahis* – non –violent /civil resistance – validated as nothing else might have the cause for Indian unity. But above all, the participation of women in the freedom movement shaped the women's movement and legitimised women's presence and "claim to a place in the governance of India" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 154).

In May 1931, against the tumultuous backdrop of steadily increasing agitation and revolt in India, with many women revolutionaries in prison and rising cases of police abuse and crimes of rape and assault, especially against women of the lower classes; it also became clear that Congress was either unable to or lacked interest in focusing on the issues of women's rights. Delegates were elected from different District Congresses to organise meetings and discuss the formation of a Women's Congress. Sarala Devi addressed a hall full of women dressed in crimson *khaddar* – homespun – saris with arguments that were unembellished, direct and "hit hard" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 142). Sarala Devi Chaudhuri's discourse and arguments for women's rights and the formation of a separate Congress for women have earned her the honorary christening by Geraldine Forbes as the "grandmother of politics and feminism" of India.

Even while acknowledging the role played by men in making women a part of the freedom movement; Sarala Devi had no qualms about challenging them regarding their real interests in forwarding the women's cause. As such, she declared that the men led Congress was satisfied with simply assigning "to women the position of law-breakers only and not law-makers" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 143). She demanded to know why Congress had never considered the possibility of "an anti-brothel campaign, alleging that "prostitution was as harmful to women as alcoholism was to men" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 143). Sarala Devi was unsuccessful in getting Congress to approve the formation of a Woman's Congress, however as Forbes states, she gave "what was certainly the most forceful feminist speech of the 1930s with a call for legal, economic, social, and educational equality (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 143)". Evidently, her audience, still exceedingly conservative was unable and unwilling to concede. As a result, her demands for resolutions that would favour birth control, equal treatment of women and a Woman's Congress to push specifically women related policies, was rejected.

Rabindranath Tagore, Sarala Devi's illustrious noble laureate brother did not agree with Gandhi about his exclusively *swadeshi* policy or the form which the nationalist movement was taking. Tagore's writing focuses largely on the problems and issues of the nationalist movement; and whilst Tagore's patriotism and love for Bengal and the nation was unquestionable he vehemently shunned the use of religious iconography and absolute doctrines as the tool to drive the

movement. His disagreements with Gandhi, regarding *swadeshi* and non-cooperation *in* particular have been amply documented in the numerous letters exchanged between them; Rabindranath was ever respectful but was even scathing in some of his views as regards Gandhi's policies and agenda.[74] Tagore was of the opinion that these tactics were the first steps towards attitudes of intolerance.

The letters between two intellectuals who were both friends and adversaries are poignant testimonies of what it means to express disagreement with arguments and the type of dignity that is completely lost to modern politicians in the digital age. Here were two towering thinkers practically on opposite sides as regards what they considered the right strategies towards the common goal of gaining independence from colonial rule. Never once did they falter in their convictions of their opinion nor did they ever lose respect for the other's opinion. Above all, they sought in their positions always the advancement and good of the overall public, above any sort of personal agenda or their own private ego.

The period saw a revival of popular festivals, songs, folk theatre productions all with notable nationalist slants. The painters of the period also broke away from Western realism, turning to Indian origin artwork to define new tendencies, and the first Indian film productions also started with a larger than life focus on *Swadeshi* (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). At the same time, a *swadeshi* national

[74] See: The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-41; compiled and edited by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.

educational program was established based on national history and control. The program included training on physical education and Indian morality standards, as well as history, culture, technical and science education. As regards the period, Tharu and Lalita highlight that amongst the most important aspects of the period was the emphasis on '*atmashakti'* as in self-reliance for women. This referred to self-help as in regeneration of traditional crafts and constructive work in the villages but also the building of personal character and the "reassertion of national dignity, honor, and confidence" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 172).

Women were expected to provide the lead in the sacrifice and image of the power of the nation. As stated by Tanika Sarkar, articles my nationalist leaders determined that the great act of sacrifice for the nation could only be completed by the release of the great force and vital principle of '*Shakti',* as in female power (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991). As seen previously, the powerful new female figure of the nationalist imagination was evident for decades afterwards, as it can still be seen in literary texts, theatre, songs and films. This powerful new self-confident Indian woman also embodied the ideals of domestic virtue, patience and sacrifice; "conscious of her power and of the strength she could find in tradition: a gentle but stern custodian of the nation's moral life. And this was the figure that dominated the literary imagination for several decades to come" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 173).

2.2.5.3 Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat has been attributed as being "the first and foremost feminist of Bengali Muslim Society (Hossain & Jahan, 1988, p. 1). Her powerful writing as sampled ahead is testimony not only of her privileged intelligence, but also of her strength of spirit and unique capacity to fight and survive against all odds. In her story, *Avarodhbasini* (*The Secluded Ones*), she wrote, "Seclusion is not a gaping wound, hurting people. It is rather a silent killer like carbon monoxide gas", (Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 57).

> […] the system reminds me of the lethal carbonic acid gas, which being a painless killer, its victims are never alert to its hazards. Women kept confined to the home die a slow death by the effect of this fatal gas known as purdah; (Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, as cited in Miah, 2014, p. 43).

A younger contemporary of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rabindranath Tagore, in contrast to their progressive upbringing, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) suffered from the consequences of the most unfortunate, opposing childhood background and upbringing. While records recount Sarala Devi's happy and uninhibited childhood in the bosom of one of the most

progressive families of the time, especially in terms of access to education and cultural excellence for Bengali women in the early nineteenth century; accounts of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's childhood detail the stifling atmosphere of an extremely wealthy, but highly orthodox, aristocratic Muslim family, within which both her sisters and herself were obliged to conform to strict *purdah* – the use of the veil as a curtain to conceal them from head to toe, – from the age of five years onwards.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain manages to defy all previsions or expectations of what a child in her circumstances might achieve; leaving a legacy in which her work and life story continue to be a source of inspiration and hope for women, especially Muslim woman, all around the Indian subcontinent (Ray B. , 2002). Spanning a period of approximately three decades, from 1902 to 1932, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain managed to produce some of the most unique and ground breaking literature visualisations of egalitarian societies and gender equality; as we see for example in the futuristic, *Sultana's Dream,* – examined further on. Additionally, she wrote essays aimed at educating both men and women on the necessity for such societies, established a school and association for Muslim women, set up organisations, while also promoting education for girls amongst the masses, and especially, raising awareness amongst women themselves regarding their rights to an alternative reality.

Today, as an educationist, feminist writer, Begum Rokeya is recognised as a pioneer and national icon in Bangladesh. Her birthday on 9th December is

celebrated as Rokeya Day, in recognition for her work in making education a reality for Bengali Muslim girls. In India, her work and life are also celebrated, particularly in Kolkata, West Bengal, where she spent the major part of her working life, (Bagchi, 2010). The regions of India, Bengal and South Asia were overlapping areas in the historical context of Rokeya Sakhawat's work. Her birthplace is in present day Bangladesh, but the most important part of her educational activism took place in present day India. Meanwhile, she is now recognised as an iconic figure in South Asia which includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Myanmar (Bagchi, 2009). Begum Rokeya is also considered to be amongst the most important figures in history to have contributed to the shaping of women's activism and education in South Asia. In her position as a subject of the British Empire, through her work she was able to contest both patriarchy and imperialism, Barnita Bagchi states about Rokeya that

> Her oeuvre shows us how women belonging to colonised countries such as India created powerful and innovative educational practices and discourses combining feminism and movements for women's access to and empowerment through modern education: women belonging to the "peripheries" of the British empire thus could and did exercise highly articulate agency for women's education in the colonial period (Bagchi, 2009, pp. 743-744).

As seen previously, the position of gender in political and social reform in India has been an issue of debate and contention since the 1880s with the issue of the *condition of Indian women* within social versus political reform at the centre of the question. As Partha Chattergee argued, in the late nineteenth century, the majority of Indian male nationalists "created an ideology in which the category "woman" was made synonymous with home, spirituality, and the unsullied purity of the Indian nation" (as cited in Bagchi, 2009, p. 744). It was in this period when Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was raised, when the construction of ideal womanhood was informed by a mixture of tradition and religion; alongside nationalistic, conservative and liberal elements.

Additionally, within the Muslim community, the quest to shape a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity also grew. This, in cases, resulted in augmented domestic and sexual control that women were subjected to. Undoubtedly, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's activism and literary work were shaped by convictions that stemmed from her own personal experiences within the confines of a home established by an ultra-conservative patriarch. Her solution, as in the case of Sarala Devi, was to promote education and political organisation. However, contrary to Sarala Devi's discourse, which was based on Hindu mythology and the concept of masculine prowess and *Shakti* as in feminine power; Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain focused her arguments on purely secular and feminism concepts, free of religious connotations. Her discourse and articulations of social transformation were structured on the regeneration of a new egalitarian

society, free of religious influences, through re-education of the minds of both men and women. As Shefali Chandra states,

> Sarala's use of Hindu mythology, her conviction about a fortified nationalism and celebration of the heroic masculine body contrasted sharply with Rokeya's distinctly secular and simultaneously searing while obviously feminine works of prose. It is evident too that the former identified colonial rule as the immediate adversary, and launched her struggle by somewhat predictably aiming at a regeneration of Indian masculine and feminine social roles. Rokeya on the other hand believed that social inequity was constituted by various forms of native patriarchy, and that the solution lay in influencing the minds of women and men: it was to the realm of ideas and ideology that Rokeya would repeatedly turn as she articulated her agenda for social transformation (Chandra S. , 2004, p. para.3).

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in Pairabondh, Rangpur, a village in what is now northern Bangladesh, on December 9, 1880 (Hasan M. M., 2013). Her family home was located in the middle of an immense plot of land surrounded by dense forest and greenery, which also housed a range of wild animal species. She says of her sprawling parental home, "We were well- to-do. We used to eat well and drink well, decked up with jewellery. Our house, surrounded by deep woods, had few equals. In the midst of three and a half

bighas[75] of land stood only our huge house", (as cited in Ray, 2005, p. 431). She was the fourth in a line of five siblings; her eldest sister, two older brothers and a younger sister (Mahmud, 2016). Begum Rokeya's mother, Rahatunnessa Saber Chowdhurani, was Zahiruddin Mahmud's first wife. According to records, she conformed to the practice of strict purdah, as was the custom and as continues to prevail amongst many communities in the region.

Rokeya and her sisters were confined to absolute seclusion within the family home, prohibited from interacting with anyone, including women, who were not immediate family members (Miah, 2014). They were forbidden to seek knowledge or to learn to read or write about any subject or language other than recite the Quran in rote form in Arabic, and learn enough Urdu so as to be able to read books and publications like *Maulana Thanawi's Bihishti Zevar,* (Heavenly Riches) (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 340), on the 'appropriate feminine conduct and behaviour'. The fact that the family lived in the region of Bengal that is present day Bangladesh, where the predominant languages spoken were Bengali and English, was of no consequence. Rokeya and her sisters Karimunnessa (1855-1926) and Humaira received no formal education. Their schooling was limited to

[75] Bigha is the traditional unit of land measurement still used in many regions of India. Although Bigha does not have a standardised measurement, in the region of West Bengal and today's Bangladesh, one Bigha is approximately between one thousand three hundred and thirty-three to one thousand six hundred and sixty-six square metres (2002).

the orthodox, informal traditional education reserved only for girls; within reserved spaces of the confines of the home

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Haidar Saber, was a landed, extremely wealthy and influential landlord who spoke seven languages; however, he was ultra-conservative in his outlook. Regardless of the historical context of the period, which clearly did not encourage a different perspective, arguably, absolute orthodoxy need not necessarily have taken priority especially when considering that Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Haidar Saber was, according to records and all standards, an extremely learned man. On the one hand, Zahiruddin Saber harboured very high expectations for his sons' education; however, as far as his daughters were concerned, he conformed to the ethos of traditional upper class Muslims, where gender roles were strictly defined and limiting for women.

The acquisition of knowledge in general as well as the learning of languages like Bengali and English, which were spoken by non-Muslims, were considered to be contaminating elements for womenfolk. On the other hand, Rokeya's two brothers, Mohamad Ibrahim Abul Asad Saber and Khalilur Rahman Abu Zaigam Saber, initiated their education at home, as was the custom, and were later sent to continue their studies in St. Xavier's college, one of Calcutta's most prestigious institutions (Miah, 2014). Understanding the importance of the need to speak English, Rokeya's brothers' education was designed to provide them with all the necessary tools to grow up and form part of the distinguished Bengali elite.

Excerpts from Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's early writings offer evidence of the anguish of her infancy, starting from the young age of five, within the stipulated requirements of adherence to the highly restrictive rules of purdah and seclusion.

> I had to observe purdah even from woman from the age of five. I did not understand why it was improper to meet somebody, but I had to observe purdah. The inner side of the house was out of bounds for the menfolk; so I did not have to suffer by their presence. However, women freely entered the house, and I had to hide myself before they could see me. As soon as any woman of the locality would come, somebody of our house would give a signal with the eye and I would run pell mell and hide myself anywhere—in the nook of the kitchen, within the rolled up pallet of the maid-servant and sometimes under the bedstead. I had to run and hide myself just as the chicks do when their mother gives them the signal against a kite. But while the chicks had a definite place—their mother's wings—to hide, I had no such place. Moreover, the chicks understand their mother's signal instinctively. I had no such instinct, and if I failed to understand the signal of the eye and came across somebody, the well-wishing elders used to say "How shameless the girls have become!", (as cited in Hakeem, 2015, p. 5).

In her writings, Begum Rokeya gives us many similar insights into the trials and agonies of her early years. She recounts episodes during which women

visitors would arrive and take over the women's quarters of the family home, wanting to explore every nook and cranny of it. As strict rules forbade that she be seen even by women, during these visits she was forced to hide wherever she could and often this was in the unused attic on the second floor of the house. Here she would usually have to spend long hours, or even the whole day hidden under a bed without food or water. Halu, a young nephew of the same age as her would sneak her some water or rice when he remembered to. Apart from that, the five or six year old Rokeya was forgotten about and left to her own devices, often spending hours on end without food or water, under a bed, alone and hidden from the world, (Ray B. , 2005).

In 1891, at the time when Rokeya Sakhawat was about ten years old, Rabindranath Tagore's relatively little known short story, *Khata,* – The Exercise Book, – was published. *Khata* is the story of a young girl, Uma, who demonstrates a strong inclination and will to read and write. The tiny Uma's random writings, copied from texts that she does not understand, initially as scribbles on the walls of her home and later as words and phrases in a notebook become a source of major *upodrob* – as in 'trouble', to the whole family (Chattopadhyay A. , 2011, p. para. 10). Uma's story is a poignant portrait of the emotions and profound pain suffered by a young girl child, as a consequence of the rigidly austere patriarchal family and society she is born into. Uma copies phrases from a book she finds while also adding her own phrases to already

written notes in her father's expenses logbook, and in an article she finds that was written by her elder brother.

There is very clear irony in Tagore's story. Young Uma copies her initial writings from what was certainly, by the standards of the time, a highly scandalous, sexually explicit book titled *The Secret Adventures of Haridas;* an adaptation and interpretation by Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay of George W. M. Reynolds *Joseph Wilmot, or, The Memories of a Male-Servant*, published in 1903, (Bhattacharya, 2008). The book which the innocent Uma lays her hands on is under her brother's wife's pillow. It relates the lives and exploits of the prostitutes in *Sonagachhi,* the largest, oldest and most notorious red-light districts of Kolkata; "For generations of Bengalis from the late nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century *Haridaser Guptakatha* came to embody the ultimate adult experience to be read and enjoyed in secret" (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 255). Sonagachhi is known to house hundreds of multi-story brothels with thousands of sex workers.[76]

The fact that the innocent young Uma does not understand the text that she is copying while creating her own text, could almost be a source of humour if it weren't for the tragedy in the overt implication of Uma's lack of access to education and the unfortunate Haridas' life as a voyeur of prostitution. When

[76] Watch documentary: Born into Brothels: and Calcutta's Red Light kids, by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman.

Uma's older brother discovers her writings on his article, he punishes her severely, seizing from her the pen and notebook in which she had taken to writing after her initial episode of scribbling on walls and in other's manuscripts. She is finally married off to an older man and her notebook permanently confiscated by her husband. Thus ends Uma's aspirations to rise out of her predestined life; as does her attempt to shape out for herself anything other than the drudgery and misery of domesticity in purdah.

The experiences of Rabindranath Tagore's fictional character, Uma, in many ways, defined the reality of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and her elder sister Karimunnessa Saber's childhood struggles. Excerpts from Begum Rokeya's personal letters and manuscripts of her musings offer reflections such as "I have never experienced the love of a father, mother, an elder or a teacher [...]; I never knew what parental love was (as cited in Quayum, 2016, p. 140). Her elder sister, Karimunessa, determined to learn to read and write, painstakingly taught herself by eavesdropping on her younger brothers' lessons. She had learnt the Quran by heart, although she did not understand what she recited. Karimunnessa was particularly interested in Bengali literature. As she was the eldest sibling, she was not able to benefit from the support of an older brother as Rokeya did. She studied in strict secrecy, even so, when her interests in learning, especially her passion for Bengali language and literature were discovered; she was sent to live under the supervision of her grandparents and married off by the age of fourteen (Tharu & Lalita, 1991); (Hasan M. M., 2013).

Fortunately, Karimunnessa Saber's marital family were liberal and modern. They supported female education and Karimunnessa's husband, Abdul Hakim Khan Gaznavi encouraged her interests, helping her to further her education by providing her access to "hundreds of thousands of books" (Hossain, 1992, p. 57). Karimunnessa was also extremely talented and soon began writing poems exploring themes of women, gender and love. Karimunnessa Saber has been recognised as "the first known modern Muslim woman poet of Bengal" (Hasan M. M., 2013, p. 45). She was over twenty five years older than Rokeya and on becoming a widow, went back to the family home and took on the role of protector and mother of Rokeya. Karimunnessa finished two of her longest poems, the 118 page long *Manob Bikas* and *Dukkha Tarangini – Suffering River* in 1881, having worked on the former for near twenty years (Hossain, 1992). She started learning Arabic when she was sixty-seven, in order to understand the verses of the Quran that she could recite from memory.

Karimunnessa Saber was a defining person for the young Rokeya. She questioned the societal norms as concerned women, thus first voicing the issue which was to become the focus of a lifetime of work for Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Yasmin Hossain asserts that Karimunnessa Saber

> […] was defiant in her challenge to society, her convictions were strong, and her faith in herself constant. In her, Rokeya, younger and impressionable, found a mentor. It was the older sister who taught her not only to intellectualize the issues and themes we see her so involved with in

> her work, but also to question the very nature and purpose of existence, pushing her forward onto the quest for self-identity. In this, her influence is immeasurable, for in her, Rokeya found a role model who inspired and encouraged her at every step (Hossain, 1992, p. 57).

Begum Rokeya wrote of her sister Karimunnessa, “If society had not been so oppressive, Karimunnessa would have been one of the brightest jewels of this country” (as cited in Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 341).

Rokeya’s elder brother Ibrahim Abul Asad Saber, as stated previously, attended the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Calcutta, later on going for his higher education studies to England. Fortunately, Ibrahim Saber’s education and experiences in England, his exposure to relatively liberal societal attitudes concerning women, particularly as compared to what he was accustomed to at home, shaped his thinking making him a progressive liberal champion for women’s education; with an attitude absolutely contrary to that of his father’s. Ibrahim Saber took to teaching Rokeya, well into the night, while the rest of the household slept. They spent long hours by candle light, often until dawn when they were called for the first morning prayers. Rokeya was bright and hardworking, her curiosity and eagerness to absorb as much knowledge as possible won over her brother’s heart, as he made it a priority to protect her as much as he could from the societal stipulations of the time.

Despite not having had the opportunity of formal education Rokeya eventually learnt at least five languages, Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. Her sister, Karimunnessa taught her mainly Bangla while Ibrahim taught her English (Hasan M. M., 2013). Ibrahim is said to have once held up a large illustrated book in English, saying to Rokeya, "Little sister, if you can learn this language, all the doors to the treasures of the world will be open for you" (as cited in Hasan, 2013, p. 46). Ibrahim also delayed Rokeya's marriage as long as possible, arranging for her to marry the educated and liberal minded Sakhawat Hossain, when she was sixteen. Rokeya dedicated the book version of her utopian fable, *Sultana's Dream*, written originally in English, to her elder sister, Karimunnessa, and her novella, *Padmarag* to her brother Ibrahim (Bagchi, 2010).

Bharati Ray adverts about the possible misinterpretation of Begum Rokeya's feelings of gratitude to her husband, despite his apparent support of her in all her endeavours. Ray states that although Rokeya spoke of her husband with the deserving respect and ensured that the school she set up with the money he left her was in his memory and named after him, she made little mention of him in her writings and dedicated *Avarodhbasini* – The Secluded Ones – to her mother, and her two major works, *Motichoor* and *Padmarag* to her elder sister and brother (Ray B. , 2005).

Rokeya's husband, Sakhawat Hossain, a widow with one daughter, was the deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur in Bihar and a wealthy man of some power and influence. He had been educated in England and was a frequent traveller to

Europe. Although, as per the customs, there was an enormous age difference between them; he was a champion of women's education, encouraging her to fulfill her full potential while he helped further her learning. Sakhawat Hossain firmly "believed that women's education was the best cure for the evils that plagued his society" (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, p. 341). Recognising Rokeya's talent, he gave her lessons, helping her to further improve her English, encouraging her to write essays while stimulating her interests and intellect through literature, and new ideas (Forbes G. H., 1996), (Hossain, 1992). Sakhawat Hossain was to encourage all of Rokeya's endeavours; taking great pride and interest not only in her literary efforts but also towards organising and establishing facilities for Muslim women's education, for which he also provided funds.

Within a few years of their marriage, when Begum Rokeya was still just twenty-two years old, she began publishing articles on the condition of women. Her first article title *Pipasha* – 'Thirst' was published in 1902 in the young journal *Nabaprabha,* edited by Gyanendralal Ray (Ray B. , 2005). Her publications throughout her lifetime in the form of articles, short stories and essays focused on her principle preoccupation with the need to raise awareness and awaken woman to their condition of subjugated and oppressed subjects. Begum Rokeya considered access to education and financial independence as the indispensable and unquestionable paths to women's emancipation and empowerment.

> We shall do whatever is needed to be done to attain equality with man. If earning our livelihood independently ensures our freedom, we shall do that.

> If necessary, we shall be lady-clerk, lady magistrate, lady barrister, lady-judge—everything. Fifty years from now, there will be a lady-Viceroy who would transform all the women into 'queens.' Why should we not earn? Don't we have hands, feet, intelligence? What is [sic] that we don't have? Could not we direct the labour that we give in keeping the husband's house to run an independent business? […] If we can not [sic] get employment in the offices of the government, we will take to agriculture. Why do you cry for not being able to find a bridegroom for your daughter? Give proper education to your daughters and let them earn their own livelihood. (Begum Rokeya, as cited in Hakeem, 2015, p. 12).

Sakhawat Hossain introduced his wife in society, encouraging her to socialise with Hindus, Christians and Muslims within their social circles, as well as helping her make the connections which would help the prospects of her initiatives and endeavours (Hasan M. M., 2013), (Philip, 2015). They had two daughters, both of whom died when they were barely a few months old. When eleven years after their marriage, Sakhawat Hossain also died, Begum Rokeya dedicated the rest of her days to writing and the development of diverse projects to promote education and the improvement of Muslim women's lives.

Upon Sakhawat Hossain's death, Rokeya inherited approximately 60,000 rupees – approximately 750.00 euros, – quite a sizable amount for the times, 10,000 (125.00) of which Sakhawat Hossain had specifically destined for the

establishment of a girls' school. Five years after his death, Begum Rokeya set up a school initially in Bhagalpur, in October 1909 with 5 pupils. The school did not flourish due to community protests and conflicts with her step-daughter who eventually banished Rokeya from the family home. She moved to Kolkata where she remained for the rest of her life and went on to establish another school, which opened its doors on 16th March, 1911 (Bagchi, 2010). Initially located in a rented house, by 1915, the school had eighty-four students and was gradually upgraded to an English medium high school by 1931; and eventually permanently relocated on 17 Lord Sinha Road, Kolkata, in 1968; after numerous relocations. By 1932, the year of Begum Rokeya's demise, the school was obtaining a 75% pass rate on the matriculation exams (Bagchi, 2010).

However, it was not until 1935 that the government began to offer regular financial aid and funding to the school. Undoubtedly, maintaining the school open and functioning must have been a permanent struggle both logistically and financially. The school, which Begum Rokeya named after her husband, is still running today as the *Sakhawat Memorial Govt. Girls High School,* in Kolkata, India (Hasan M. M., 2013), (Forbes G. H., 1996). As Forbes asserts, this was not the first school established for Muslim girls by a Muslim woman; however, "Begum Rokeya's systematic and undaunted devotion to this project has earned her the title of pioneer" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 55).

Although girls from all religions were welcome, *The Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School* was designed and set up specifically to cater for girls whose families

obligated the practice of purdah, even though Begum Rokeya was, without exception, a harsh and vocal critic of the evils of purdah and seclusion; which she made clear in all her talks, public appearances and writings. Evidence indicates that in the extremely conservative Muslim society, Begum Rokeya was aware that families would only permit their daughters to attend the school unless they were allowed to observe strict purdah. As such, even while Begum Rokeya expressed "stinging criticisms of the practice" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 56); school transportation was carried out in strictest seclusion, with curtained widows – curtains had replaced the original shutters which had caused many pupils to vomit or faint in the stifling hot, airless coaches – and new types of head coverings were designed to adapt to the new 'modern' woman and the new spaces she was beginning to occupy (Forbes G. H., 1996).

In 1916, Begum Rokeya founded the *Anjuman-Kahawateen-i-Islam (Islamic Sisters)* association, also termed the *All-India Muslim Ladies Conference*, (Sarkar S. S., 2008), (Hasan, 2018), aimed at working on the welfare and towards the uplift of Muslim women. The Association, which sought to represent the interests of all Muslim women, encouraged women to actively get involved and partake in activities promoting social improvement and education. Branches of *Anjuman* were set up in diverse regions; initially centrally administered, they gradually became independent, self-governed and administrated entities (Hasan, 2018). There are accounts of Begum Rokeya having personally visited families from house to house in order to persuade them to allow their daughters to attend school,

promising to personally "take full responsibility of looking after and tutoring them" (Hasan, 2018, p. 176).

As previously stated, even though Begum Rokeya, saw that she would be unable to fill her institutions with the girls and women she wanted to educate if she did not permit them to continue the practice of purdah, her writings offer stinging, sometimes satirical criticisms of a practice that she utterly condemned as abominable. In her focus on the promotion of education for women in a climate of hostility and criticism, she was often accused of being a Europhile and pro-Christian (Forbes G. H., 1996). Begum Rokeya received further condemnation for endorsing Katherine Mayo's 1927, infamous critique of Indian social customs titled, *Mother India*; famously labelled as the *drain inspector report*, by Gandhi. We shall briefly examine *Mother India* and its polemical implications further ahead in this study.

Begum Rokeya addressed her critics with a unique and unconventional analysis of what she considered to be the pathological ailment that was the root cause of the "backwardness" (Hasan M. M., 2013, p. 48) of Muslim society. She argued that Muslim religious leaders' opposition to English education had left them behind, denying them access to enormous resources of knowledge and the prosperity that knowledge could provide. Begum Rokeya also put forward the argument that the neglect of female education would lead to the downfall of the whole Muslim community and "ultimately threaten Islamic culture" (Forbes G. H., 1996, p. 57). She articulated her point with arguments and questions such as

"Can a community, [sic] that has locked half of its population in the prison of ignorance and seclusion, keep pace with the progress of other communities that have advanced female education on a full par with men?", (as cited in Hasan M., 2013, p. 48).

Begum Rokeya also pointed out that while children of other communities in India and around the world were being raised by educated mothers, Muslim children raised by illiterate *foolish* mothers were bound to be disadvantaged and lag behind non-Muslim children.

> Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of well-educated mothers must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers. […] Men want to have their sons brave, valiant and bright; but, […] this will not happen if the mothers remain ignorant (as cited in Hasan M., 2013, p. 49).

Despite the unpopularity of her campaigns amongst many, *The Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School* thrived over the years, with the gradual increase in attendance of Muslim girls from *respectable* families. It would seem that Begum Rokeya's principal argument about the threat that ignorance spelt for Islamic culture struck home, at least to a certain extent. Begum Rokeya writings provide evidence of her position not only as a relentless activist and educationalist but also as a leading feminist writer of Muslim Bengal in the early twentieth century.

In the 52 years of her life, amongst numerous writings, she authored forty-seven chronological texts documenting the practice and custom of purdah, an essay on the *Burqa* – garment that covers the whole body with a narrow net across the eyes to provide for minimal vision, *Padmarag* – an account of women's personal stories towards emancipation with clear autobiographical undertones, *Avarodhbasini* – 'The Secluded Ones', – and her famous *Sultana's Dream,* a feminist utopia written in English, in which women are the rulers of the world and men are kept secluded in the home. The significance and activism in Begum Rokeya's writings are nothing short of phenomenal in the context of the historical period of Muslim Bengali society, her status as essentially an autodidact and the practically negligible existence of a feminist literary canon in Muslim Bengal, on which she might have inspired her own work. As Mahmudul Hasan asserts, "Rokeya can be regarded as one of the most important feminist voices in the annals of twentieth-century world literature", (Hasan, 2018, p. 175).

One of the most noteworthy factors of Begum Rokeya's feminist agenda was her firm belief and emphasis regarding the necessity for economic independence in order to be able to break away from the patriarchal structures of male domination and oppression. Her position was in fact a significant shift from the reformist agendas of the period, which focused principally on women's welfare within conventional women's roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. In their analysis of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's work, titled *'A Feminist Foremother',* Mohammad Quayum and Mahmudul Hasan highlight factors that

"place her work in a realm quite apart from that of her contemporaries – Muslim as well as Hindu" (Quayum & Hasan, 2017, p. n.p. Chap.2). In her writings, Begum Rokeya consistently analyses the economic links between subordination, gender privilege and oppression. She also insisted on the reality and necessity of women's agency in their emancipation as well as criticising their role in the perpetuation of their own subservience to men.

> I ask for that kind of education that will equip women to acquire their rights as citizens.… Education must be for both physical and mental advancement. Women must know that they were not born into this world merely to be decorative pieces in fine dresses and expensive jewelleries. […] Their life is not to be dedicated for the sole purpose of pleasing their husbands; let them not be dependent on others for their upkeep. […] Why should we not have access to gainful employment? What do we lack? Are we not able-bodied and endowed with intelligence? In fact, why should we not employ the labour and energy we expend on domestic chores in our husbands' homes to run our own enterprises? (as cited in Ray, 2005, p. 439).

Begum Rokeya was unique amongst her contemporaries in her questioning of the right to employment outside the home and contesting the state of marriage as being the most important and ultimate goal for women. Her position on marriage was clearly demonstrated in her stories, especially in *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag – The Ruby*. We saw previously the attempt by Saraladevi

Chaudhuri to work in a school which she had to forego, apparently because of harassment. Begum Rokeya advocated the right to education in 1905 when the majority of the discourse on women's education focused exclusively on education for welfare in the domestic sphere, and as a means with which to prepare women to fulfill roles of cultured wives and mothers. Bharti Ray states that in 1905, a handful of women had started working outside the home in paid jobs, but they themselves were silent on the subject, in terms of asserting the right of women to the choice of employment outside the domestic sphere (Ray B. , 2005).

In 1903 one of Begum Rokeya's most radicle articles, titled *Alankar na – The Badges/Jewellery of Slavery* was published in the monthly journal *Mahila,* edited by Girish Chandra Sen (1835-1910), (Ray B. , 2005). In 1904, it would seem that *Alankar – The Badges/Jewels of Slavery* was also published in the newly launched journal *Nabanoor* in which Begum Rokeya published several of her articles (Azim & Hasan, 2014); (Ray B. , 2005). *Nabanoor* was a progressive journal which encouraged contributions from both men and women equally. Begum Rokeya's brilliance in the use of sarcasm as the stylistic tool and weapon of her literary work cannot be overstated. Her writing style was direct and simple, but caustically tinged with the most lingering and uncomfortable bitterness. An excerpt from *Alankar na* in which Rokeya blames women themselves for their lack of agency, their apathy and willingness to conform to the status quo states,

> I almost die of shame every time I think of the pathetic cowardice of women, […] Handcuffs for prisoners are made of steel; ours are made of

> gold and silver and we call them bangles. Perhaps in the imitation of dog collars we have fashioned our necklaces, strung with jewels. Horses and elephants are tethered with iron chins and we happily put gold chains around our necks (as cited in Ray, 2005, p 434).

Begum Rokeya explored the themes of her protest further, from diverse angles, in a collection of essays published in a two volume anthology titled *Motichur.* Volume I of *Motichur – A String of Sweet Pearls* – published in 1905; contains a revised version of the highly polemical piece, *Amader Abanti – Our Downfall*; later republished as *Streejatir Abanati – Woman's Downfall* (Sarkar M. , 2008); (Quayum & Hasan, 2017). In these essays, Begum Rokeya brings across two fundamental points regarding her take on the status of women in general. She asserts that the oppression of women is the direct result of the purposeful androcentric doctrines which are enshrined in all religions and that woman themselves contribute towards their own subordination as a result of attitudes of apathy and a lack of will to fight to rise out of their condition of dependency. In her analysis about the roles of religious practices in women's oppression, Begum Rokeya presents us with arguments, which were, questionably, amongst the first to be voiced in this particular historical context of India. Unsurprisingly, her essays bore the brunt of tremendous and stinging criticisms all round, as she raised uncomfortable and fundamental questions regarding the state of womanhood, be it Muslim or Bengali, all at once.

> [Whenever a woman] has tried to raise her head, [she has been]…crushed with the excuse of religion or the holy texts… [and we have gradually] come to accept [such repression] as religious injunctions….Even our souls have become enslaved….Where the bond of religion is slack…women are in a state as advanced as men.…I have to say that ultimately "religion" has strengthened the bonds of our enslavement; men are lording over women under the pretext of religion. Hence I am forced to [raise the issue of] "religion." For this religious people will forgive me. (Hossain, as cited in Mahua, 2008, p. 119).

Within these texts Begum Rokeya Hossain, outlines the reasons and arguments to support her points, as she considers them, for women's *'*degeneration*'* arguing that religious texts embodied controlling social norms which had been designed specifically by "men and deployed against women in order "to keep [them] in darkness" (Sarkar M. , 2008, p. 119). Her manifesto is filled with arguments such as,

> Men have always propagated such religious texts as edicts of GOD to keep us women in the dark. […] One can clearly understand that the scriptures are nothing but a set of regulating systems prescribed by men. We hear the prescriptions were laid down by saints. If a woman could have become a saint, perhaps she would have prescribed opposite regulations, (as cited in Ray, 2005, p. 437).

Begum Rokeya had no problem in separating herself from the fact of her Muslim heritage in her objective; which was clearly not to present one particular religion or set of cultural traditions and practices as superior to another, but to forthrightly highlight the common factors in all religions that contributed to women's oppression. Begum Rokeya's writings became particularly problematic as open and direct contestations of the infrastructures of gender subjugation, sanctioned by religions which allowed for absolute control over women's lives and their liberties by men. Her position becomes highly threatening as a challenge that forthrightly declares the religious scriptures to be undivine male creations, and inventions written to maintain the power reigns of manhood; thus lacking in any type of sanctity or legitimacy (Ray B. , 2005).

Mahua Sarkar states that Begum Rokeya was unique in her rejection of the prevalent opinion of reformers of the time, who considered that the issue of women's position was a problem with "the proper implementation" of religious laws (Sarkar M. , 2008, p. 120). Instead, she carried the discourse to a completely different level, naming religion and religious texts as man-made doctrines, construed with a specific intent, thus making men wholly guilty of the state of "women's condition".

Amader Abanti resulted in a backlash of criticism against Begum Rokeya from every direction; including liberal thinkers, men, women Muslims and Hindus. When it was reprinted, as mentioned above, in 1905, as a part of her first

anthology *Motichur (Vol. 1),* the essay was renamed *Streejatir Abanti,* – Women's Downfall,' and was missing the five most controversial paragraphs which questioned "male agency in both the social construction of religion and their uses in the project of subordinating women" (Sarkar M. , 2008, p. 120). After the backlash caused by *Amader Abanti,* although in diverse manners, all Begum Rokeya's writings always focused on the religious, political and social discrimination of women as well as issues of religion and communities, it was only in her final, unfinished article, *Narir Adhikar – Women's Rights* that she returned to the subject of the "differential rights of men and women underpinned by religious laws" (Sarkar M. , 2008, p. 120). In the *Motichur* texts Begum Rokeya also addresses what was the normal and frequent depiction of Indian women as 'degraded', 'passive' and 'helpless' victims, in the late nineteenth-century writing and discourse, not only due to colonial rule and patriarchal mind-sets, but also as a result of the increasing communal conflicts, in the wake of differences provoked through the processes of the nationalist movement and independence struggle. Another important aspect of Rokeya's discourse was her refusal to permit discourses around nation building and community to interfere with her stance regarding the women's question.

In her critique of women themselves in their roles as agents of their own oppression, Begum Rokeya sought to raise awareness in women of the necessity for self-reliance and action. She used hard hitting sarcastic arguments that were

unsettlingly, even bitingly questioning in their accusations, were obviously aimed at jolting her readers into pondering the points she put forward.

> [Quite like beggars,] having lost all self-esteem, we no longer feel embarrassed to accept charity. Gradually, our minds even have become enslaved…. The higher faculties of our minds, such as self-reliance, courage, etc. have been nipped in the bud so often… that they no longer seem to germinate…. Since we have lost the ability to differentiate between freedom and slavery, or between improvement and degeneration, men have graduated from being landlords and masters of households to our "masters". And we have gradually come to be included among the household pets or their valuable possessions. Men say that they are "sheltering us"… [but] it is their excessive care that is the reason behind our destruction (as cited in Sarkar M. 2008, chap. 3, location 1617).

Begum Rokeya was particularly critical when focusing on women's love for jewellery as a metaphor for the shackles of enslavement. She initially critiqued the use of jewellery in the 1903 essay, *Alankar na* referred to earlier in this chapter. She was to return the subject of the role and usage of jewellery in defeating women's self-reliance and independence. She elaborated on her concept of enslavement through jewellery, in her later writings in *Amader Abanti*. Here, she used such arguments as:

> And our beloved jewellery –these are [nothing but] ... badges of slavery. Prisoners wear iron shackles ... [and] we [lovingly] wear chains made of gold and silver.... And how eager women are for [these signs of bondage]! As if life's happiness and enrichment depend solely on them.... No matter how destructive alcohol is, the alcoholic does not want to give it up. Likewise we feel proud when we bear these marks of slavery on our bodies (as cited in Sarkar M. 2008, chap. 3, location 1625-1627).

It is clear that Begum Rokeya considered jewellery to be amongst the controlling devices used by men; and she blamed women for not seeing through the farce and accepting it. By adorning her with jewellery, he converted women into subjugated, mentally and physically enslaved decorative objects; which he used to show off and display his wealth. The aristocratic bride, immobile and weighed down by tons of jewelry [sic], heavy clothing and elaborate make-up is presented as a symbol of this enslavement (Azim & Hasan, 2014, p. 36). As on other occasions, Begum Rokeya's take on jewellery as a patriarchal tool caused an uproar of angry backlash on many fronts, including from women who accused her of being Westernised and anti-feminine. What in fact we might infer is that Begum Rokeya intended with her text to contest traditional customary practices which shaped and outlined an 'ideal femininity' and its difference from masculinity, parameters within which women were apparently willing to submit to

male dominance, while remaining dependent on them and wearing adornments in the form of jewellery as a sign of their consent (Sarkar M. , 2008).

In reading Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Mahua Sarkar brings up a significant point when she asserts that in her writings as regards the use of jewellery as instruments of dominium within obvious patriarchal family structures, Begum Rokeya was in some manner anticipating the late twentieth century western feminists'

> critique of the unquestionability of masculine rule–that is, a husband's God-given sexual claims on the wife's body based on perceived notions of essential differences between the sexes and the "natural subjection" of women bolstered, in turn, by religious texts (Sarkar M. , 2008, pp. chap. 3, location 1625).

This argument, regarding the lack of control over the access to their bodies to which women seemed willing to acquiesce to, helps in some way also to understand Rokeya's comparison of women in seclusion as slaves in her polemical 1904 *Amader Abanti – Our Downfall*.

> *Pathikagan* (female readers)! Have you ever given any thought to your misery? In this civilized world of the twentieth century what are we? Slaves! I hear that the institution of slavery has disappeared from this world, but has our bondage ended? Why are we slaves? – there are reasons (as cited in Sarkar, 2008, chap. 3, locations 1576-1578).

As might be evident, the essays referred to above were directed mainly to women of the middle and upper classes. The women from the poor classes obviously did not have the option of remaining idle and secluded in purdah. It was the normalisation of the ideal of an apparently luxurious life of the 'fair skinned, idle, elegant, docile, jewel clad lady' which in turn served to cement male dominance, while simultaneously construing this image as a universally desirable position that was at the brunt of Begum Rokeya's critique. Sarkar asserts that Begum Rokeya's stance was almost a century ahead of her time; in her ability to establish the link to gender, not only in terms of women's oppression, but in the construction and functioning of institutions as well as social relationships. Sarkar further states that this is "an understanding that is typically ascribed to late-twentieth-century feminist thinking" (Sarkar M. , 2008, pp. chap. 3, location 1641). Fifty years after her death, Rokeya Begum Sakhawat was still credited with being the only author to have been as frank and forthright in her criticism and writings on the subject of agency and self-reliance for women. Her arguments regarding the right to be independent, treated and addressed as equals, as making up over half of the population are echoes of rights that continue to be manifested today.

Begum Rokeya's later writings were not as stinging in character as those just examined; they included satirical characteristics of what could be regarded as elements of black humour. Even as a contemporary of Rabindranath Tagore, Begum Rokeya did not benefit from any interaction with him or from participating

in the congregations of intellectuals and literary circles as was customary in the Tagore home. As such, her literary style was shaped almost entirely by her feminist agenda, as a tool with which to denounce patriarchy and colonialism, while also exploring the female psyche and highlighting the injustices and sufferings of women under the prevailing societal norms. Often her writings took the form of metaphors and allegories of the state of India and Indians as a colonised people. In a clear reference to the freedom movement, in her story *Gyanphal,* Begum Rokeya presents us with *Kanaka Dwipa,* the isle of gold which is being plundered and exploited by traders who do not adhere to previously accorded agreements of trust and trade, thereby causing the downfall of the isle. Only through collaborative joint administration between the men and women of *Kanaka Dwipa* does the isle finally manage to flourish.

In another tale, *Muktiphal,* also a clear allegory of the ailing colonised nation, the personality of *Kangalini,* an allegory for colonised India, favours her sons over her daughters. When *Kangalini's* health fails, her sons, who are clearly incompetent and inefficient, unsuccessfully take charge of restoring her health; while her daughters, although intelligent and organised, are not permitted to participate in nursing the ailing *Kangalini.* In the face of *Kangalini*'s worsening condition and the possibility of her imminent demise, responding to the evident ineptitude of the brothers, one of the sisters, *Shrimati,* challenges them, stating "Till you let us raise our heads, it will not be possible for you to secure strength" (as cited in Hasan, 2013, p. 52).

Padmarag – The Ruby, published in 1924, which Begum Rokeya dedicated to her brother, Ibrahim Abul Asad Saber, is the story of a group of women working together in a welfare organisation/institution called *Tarini Bhavan* – Salvation Army –, located in Calcutta. *Padmarag* as a story collects in one single piece Rokeya's vision about women as agents of their own lives, "as actors in social and educational change, as teachers, activists, writers, and feminists (Bagchi, 2009, p. 750). The institution, which, in the story, is founded and administered by women, is in fact the home and work place of numerous women within a "spiritualized but non-religious community" (Bagchi, 2010, p. 54).

The intricate and often complex personal stories of the 'sisters of the poor', as the residents of Tarini Bhavan are called, are in fact historical records and detailed documentation of the personal experiences and true life accounts, in some cases of the women who Begum Rokeya encountered and worked with within the community and the *Anjuman-Kahawateen-i-Islam* (Islamic Sisters) association; and in other cases, specific tales of women's struggle worth learning. In *Padmarag*, Tarini Bhavan offers its residents a school for girls and a training centre with workshops for women, while providing a roof for widows, as well as the sick and needy. The school is open to day schoolers as well as the boarders of Tarini Bhavan. Barnita Bagchi states of the institution,

> The Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women constitutes the moral, ideological and institutional core of the project. Nearly every one of the personal life-histories of the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan is a tale of

what Rokeya punningly calls ‘biye fail’: ‘biye’ means marriage in Bengali (Bagchi, 2010, p. 54).

The global and international perspective of Begum Rokeya’s imagination is clearly visible in the story of Helen Horace, a white British, who is amongst the oppressed wives living at Tarini Bhavan. Helen Horace is the victim of abuse from a violent, drunken husband who suddenly disappears. Some years later, she hears rumours that her husband, Joseph has been diagnosed as incurably insane after being arrested for murder and sent back to England, where he is incarcerated. She tries to get a divorce but ends up “tied for life to a lunatic” (Bagchi, 2010, p. 54), after her appeal for divorce is rejected in the courts of England.

Begum Rokeya bases her story of Helen Horace, resident of Tarini Bhavan, on the unfortunate true-life story of Mrs Norman Cecil Rutherford and the infamous English, 1919 divorce-suit known as Rutherford v. Rutherford. Mrs Rutherford’s court request for a divorce from Colonel Rutherford, who had been convicted of murder in 1919 and had been sent to Broadmoor Asylum, was refused. In recounting Mrs Norman Cecil Rutherford’s story through the character of Helen Horace, Begum Rokeya translates into Bengali excerpts from the actual judgement by Lord Birkenhead, which she then includes in her story (Bagchi, 2010).

It is an unfortunate circumstance that she should thus be tied for life to a dangerous, violent and homicidal lunatic … Unless death remove him or

> release her, she must look forward to a loneliness from which she can escape only by a violation of the moral law. To some, this may appear a harsh, and even an inhuman, result, but such is the Law of England (as cited in Bagchi, 2010, p. 54).

In another piece of writing, Begum Rokeya translates into Bengali an interview with Begum Tarzi, the mother of Afghan Queen Soraya (1892-1960) and wife of the liberal, modernising, Afghan King Amir Amanullah Khan, one of the most progressive and liberal leaders of the Muslim world. Amanullah of Afghanistan abolished slavery, advocated monogamous families, limited child marriage and established a system that did not support the purdah. Queen Soraya was known to have accompanied him in all official and social events, playing a critical role in the establishment of progressive policies for education, women's issues and in the overall evolution of the country. Begum Rokeya, constructs the stories of the women living in Tarini Bhavan, drawing on women's lives and histories from places as far ranging as England, Turkey and Afghanistan. Sufia Kamal (1911–99), a distant relative of Begum Rokeya who worked with her closely and who is also a national and feminist icon in Bangladesh, a creative writer and a social activist, wrote in her autobiography about the novella *Padmarag*. She highlighted the integrative paradigm of Begum Rokeya's vison of female education thus:

> The education of young girls in a school, the lessons women imbibe from the school of adversity, their mutual enlightenment from sharing each other's past, the empathy they develop for each other as a result, and the all-embracing universalist vision embodied in a huge array of activities, enrich a work that deals with familial and sexual oppression of women, personal narratives of growth and development, education, philanthropy, feminism and the creation of female utopias. Padmarag thus encapsulates in a single slim volume, a wide range of issues covering the tribulations of being a woman in a patriarchal society, the advantages of community living and the indispensability of women's education and self-development—the key to self-reliance and ultimate freedom (as cited in Bagchi, 2010, p. 56).

Sufia Kamal asserts that Tarini Bhavan was in fact a representation of Rokeya's own school where as Kamal insists, Muslim, Hindu and Cristian girls studied together. Kamal lays particular emphasis on the principles of multi religious solidarity that Begum Rokeya held, which were clearly demonstrated in the prominent role she played as an activist on the Peace Committee during the communal clashes after Partition in 1947. She also highlights that initially, when Begum Rokeya first established her school, "no daughters of the *bhadralok* – the respectable families, – would go to school" (as cited in Bagchi, 2010, p. 56). As such, it was the girls from the slums who first started attending the school. Sufia Kamal states that the school was much more an orphanage than a boarding school.

> […] a better appellation would be an ashram for orphans, carrying the charge of a spiritualized sanctuary. […] Hindu women, Christian women, oppressed women, all those who had been thrown out of their homes, who had themselves walked out of Hindu society, women for whom there was no place in English society, came and took refuge with her. Not to speak of Muslim women (as cited in Bagchi, 2010, p. 56).

In speaking of the real life people who inspired the stories told in Padmarag. Sufia Kamal gives us the example of Usha. Usha is a Hindu character who was abducted and then rescued, but her marital family refuse to take her back. The real life person behind Usha's story was a teacher called Maya who worked in the Sakhawat Memorial School. Sufi Kamal also mentions two British Christian women teachers who had been "thrown out by their husbands" (as cited in Bagchi, 2010, p. 57), who then remained in the school long after they were grey and wrinkled, teaching English and the piano.

In discussing the work that was carried out at the *Anjuman -Kahawateen-i-Islam* association, Sufia Kamal highlights Begum Rokeya's encouragement to her and other colleagues to work with all the families, including the slum dwellers. Tarini Bhavan presents an integrated functioning model of education centred action by women; focused on schooling for girls, the training and formation of adult participants (women) in income generating activities, while weaker, disabled and homeless individuals are offered refuge. In the historical context of its

writing, amongst the outstanding aspects of *Padmarag* we find also its clear and bold statement that no woman of any religion or colour is free from the possibility of being a victim of patriarchal oppression. To quote Barnita Bagchi, "Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, and Christians, black women and white women, all suffer from patriarchal oppression, and all need to receive refuge and education from communities of competent women working together to reform society" (Bagchi, 2008, p. 1).

Clearly, Begum Rokeya saw women's ability to organise and form associations as fundamental in the successful implementation of progressive social and development projects to further education and the women's cause. Barnita Bagchi also points out that

> Padmarag shows fictionally how women like Rokeya built up social capital – defined by Robert Putnam as trust, norms, and networks that facilitate social organisation and change – to create everyday practices for women's civil society work in education, harnessing their cultural and economic capital as educated gentlewomen (Bagchi, 2009, p. 750).

Padmarag also offers a poignant and graphic account of the true life problems Begum Sakhawat encountered and the rewards involved in women working together running a pioneering school. Barnita Bagchi states that

> Behind Rokeya's fictional Tarini Bhavan, its school, and its women's association lurk many real-life institutions and organisations founded by

and for women, from the late nineteenth century onwards. In Western India (in Mumbai, Pune, and Kedgaon) Ramabai had founded the institutions *Sharada Sadan* (Hall of Learning), *Kripa Sadan* (Hall of Mercy), and *Mukti Sadan* (Hall of Freedom), for high-caste Hindu widows, rescued prostitutes, and lower-caste and disabled men and women respectively. These institutions are reflected in Rokeya's Tarini Bhavan. Rokeya knew Ramabai's work, as evidenced by her mention of Ramabai in an essay (Bagchi, 2009, p. 751).

Thus, *Padmarag*, although a work of utopian fiction was clearly based on Begum Rokeya's real life experiences, that is, grounded in the real-life, daily social realities and details of the reformist projects undertaken by women. As such, it is quite and extraordinary piece, albeit little known as it has just recently been translated from its original Bengali into English, by Barnita Bagchi. As Bagchi states, "it is a remarkable work and crucial to one's understanding of Rokeya's body of writing and her priceless contribution to society" (Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. xiii)

Both *Padmarag* and *Sultana's Dream* are highly provocative pieces bearing in mind the historical context in which they are set. However, unlike *Padmarag*, Begum Rokeya wrote *Sultana's Dream* originally in English, as a dream vision that takes place in an imaginary land. It continues to be possibly amongst the very first stories to be written in English by an Indian woman of the colonial era, as

such, in the canon of Indian Literature writing in English; it remains unique (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Roushan Jahan states that *Sultana's Dream* is in fact "one of the earliest "self-consciously feminist" utopian stories written in English by a woman" (Hossain & Jahan, 1988, p. 1) and certainly "the first such story to be written by an Indian woman" (Hossain & Jahan, 1988, p. 1). It also remains fresh and undated even today "[…] and retains its status as one of the most successful pieces of Indian writing in English" (Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. xii).

The utopian imagination employed by Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* is futuristic, witty and funny; while, always true to character, placing utmost emphasis and focus on her message of education as the principle agency of progress. Barnita Bagchi states,

> Rokeya's better-known utopian short story Sultana's Dream (1905), a dream-vision of a female-led country in which science, technology, and female education go hand in hand to create a peaceful, pollution-free land in which men, in a satirical inversion, are confined to men's quarters, the *mardana.* (Bagchi, 2017, p. para.1).

Sultana's Dream was first published in 1905 in the English language journal, *The Indian Ladies Magazine,* in Madras. Mukti Lakhi states that Rokeya wrote *Sultana's Dream* as

> […] an act of female literary subversion which aims to craft an alternative reality fairer to women as well as a way in which to test the English

> language skills she had acquired from the secret, night time tutoring that her elder brother had given her, (Lakhi, 2006, p. 2).

In 1908, *Sultana's Dream* was published as a book by S. K. Lahiri and Company, in Calcutta; despite the fact that amongst women, its readership was limited to only the extremely privileged who understood the English language, (Hossain & Jahan, 1988); (Lakhi, 2006).

After the forthright anger and stinging wit of Begum Rokeya's previous writings, *Sultana's Dream* was received "as a pleasant fantasy" (Hossain & Jahan, 1988, p. 2), rather than the "terrible revenge" (Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. xii), as Rokeya's husband was supposed to have exclaimed, on reading the piece, according to Begum Rokeya. In this utopian fantasy with clear elements of science fiction, women are the governors and administers of the world, men are confined to carrying out the daily mundane domestic chores in the *murdana* – as opposed to the *zenana*, – which is the women's quarters of traditional homes. Science and technology are harnessed to serve humanity and eliminate the ills of disease, war and crime, which are practically non-existent; cooking is a simple and pleasurable affair, while horticulture is considered an importance business venture (Hossain & Jahan, 1988).

In her introduction to the book, Roushan Jahan states that in *Sultana's Dream*, apart from protesting women's lack of freedom or power, of public social roles or agency of any sort, Begum Rokeya also constructed her vison through this

feminist utopia in direct opposition to the truly deplorable conditions of the dust filled Indian cities of the time; ravaged by disease, dirt, pollution, and odours; and in "unequivocal condemnation of male militarism" (Hossain & Jahan, 1988, p. xii). In many areas of the country, the conditions of cities remain very similar to the ones Rokeya condemned. Sinjini Chatterjee points out that in a post-colonial context; the reversed hierarchy of *Sultana's Dream* also raises environmental issues (Chatterjee S. , 2018).

Sultana's Dream presents us with a world in which men are engaged in a futile and endless battle which leads them to the brink of absolute disaster and depletion of their lands' precious resources. Meanwhile, women, headed by a queen and her ably prepared assistants, amongst whom we also have the principals of two women's universities govern the country. They use their superior intellectual prowess and strategies to maximise the women populous' state of well-being and the country's resources. Women's education is universal and compulsory, while adult women attend the two women's only universities where they devote themselves to the cultivation of their intellect and talent towards the development of novel technologies that allow for schemes such as the extraction of water directly from clouds, or the harnessing and storage of concentrated solar energy.

When the country's men find themselves defeated, unable to prevent the invasion by an enemy land, the women principals of the university agree to use their technology to defend the country, on the condition that men agree to

withdraw permanently into the seclusion of the *mardana*. The women use the concentrated solar power to launch a defense missile, driving away the enemy and continuing to run the country, which is then renamed as *Ladyland*. With the men safely secluded, *Ladyland* is a place where

> […] science technology and virtue work together in perfect harmony. Air travel is the only mode of transport, land is cultivated by electrically driven motors and the weather is controlled. Ladyland embodies the triumph of the virtuous enquiring, scientific, enlightened and welfare oriented spirit in women. And its heroines are women educators (Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. xiii).

As we might infer from this study so far, gender issues have were the focus of diverse debates by both Indian and British reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial India. In the intent for reform within the contexts of 'modernity' and 'tradition', diverse debates surfaced, amongst them British feminists view regarding their roles as rescuers and leaders of Indian women's emancipation from their 'abject conditions', and Indian activists who were divided between the opinion of the 'pure traditional and, sacred' Indian woman who needed to be protected from empire, and the somewhat larger group who considered that anti-colonial movement needed to address modernisation of Indian traditions and the implementation of social reform strategies as steps towards dealing with the woman's question.

However, there appears to have been much less focus on how Indian women themselves defined their agency in the colonial period. Examining the writings of Begum Rokeya, and or for example Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, seen earlier in this chapter, contrasts with the prevalent approach by actually examining the manner in which women often were and are active agents towards their own emancipation, even when working from the confines of their domestic spheres.

Meanwhile, many articulate women active in the sphere of education also challenged old and new patriarchies as well as the boundaries between the private and public. They voiced positions that were clear contrasting from the conservative national discourse or the British colonial stance. As Meera Kosambi asserts, "colonial western India "enjoyed… a wealth of women's articulations… and the problem has been not their paucity but their retrieval and incorporation as source materials of social history" (as cited in Bagchi, 2009, p. 745). Bagchi further states that this applies also to other regions of colonial India (Bagchi, 2009). Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964), writer, politician and educationist, who after Begum Rokeya, headed the women's rights movement in Bengal, published a biography titled *Rokeya-Jibani – Life of Rokeya* – in 1937.

In her version, Shamsunnahar chronicles the struggles and difficulties that Begum Rokeya had to overcome as the "spearhead of advancement for Bengali Muslim society, which, in the fifty or so years spanning Rokeya's life, is seen to have moved from darkness towards light" (Bagchi, 2010, p. 57). Shamsunnahar offers a concise analysis of the process in which Begum Rokeya managed to

establish her institutions and associations and the difficulties she faced as a woman without any formal education. The biography includes letters that demonstrate Begum Rokeya's attention to minute details, her professionalism as well as the difficulties that she experienced. It is also an account of the close relationship and affection between her and Shamsunnahar.

Shamsunnahar's biography demonstrates the incredible skills that Begum Rokeya had in building and nurturing the important network of contacts with prominent and important figures of the time who helped her advance her cause. Begum Kaikhusrau Jahan, studied earlier in this chapter, who was the ruler of the princely state of Bhopal from 1901 to 1926, and also a passionate advocate of education for women heard about Begum Rokeya's work through the newspapers. She wrote to her encouraging her efforts (Bagchi, 2010). Prominent people figure very heavily in her list, from aristocratic rulers to judges, lawyers and Muslim leaders. […] We get a list of male reformers, industrialists, judges, learned men and *nawabs* who held out their hands to help (Bagchi, 2010, p. 59) .

Questionably, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was nothing short of genius in her ability to understand and promote the crucial link between women's organisation and associations, and lifelong learning, growth, emancipation and education. Today, access to education and the guarantee of schooling in South Asia continue to be acutely problematic and urgent issues. In the year 2000, the Education for *ALL UNESCO* stated, "half the girls in South Asia (as in sub-Saharan Africa) never attend school, over half the female population above 15 is illiterate, and

South Asia has the highest gender gap in education" (as cited in Bagchi, 2008, n.p.). Barnita Bagchi highlights reports by international experts that increasingly emphasise the necessity for grassroots and community based educational movements involving major participation of adult women, "acting as motivators, participants, galvanizers, and teachers" (Bagchi, 2008, p. n.p), in order to ensure sufficient progress in primary or basic education. Bagchi highlights the recent success stories, such as the school revolution of the hill women in Himachal Pradesh in the Himalayas, and *BRAC,* in Bangladesh or Pratham in India, – community and teacher based civil society organisation movements, – which are living proofs of the "effectiveness of women taking charge of their own lives and entering teaching and community mobilization, with a special sensitivity to girls" (Bagchi, 2008, p. n.p). Barnita Bagchi further asserts that

> Women make great unleashers of social capital in the realm of education, and a re-examination of Rokeya's oeuvre brings out both the immense difficulties and great achievements faced and won by such active, educative women. The heritage of Rokeya's multifaith, multicultural, gender-just vision, boldly and sensitively delineated in Padmarag, needs to be retrieved and learned from by those who have a similar unsectarian, feminist ethos, and who want urgently to bring millions of South Asian children and adults, particularly the neglected girls and women, into the fold of education (Bagchi, 2008, p. n.p).

Begum Rokeya's now somewhat well-known utopian novella, *Sultana's Dream*, as well as the yet to be more widely discovered, *Padmarag,* mark her as the first in a line of utopian feminist writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman from North America who published *Herland* in 1915, and the famous Virginia Woolf, who published *Three Guineas*, in 1938, also with a focus on the role of science and technology as women's tools of subversion. Tracing the birth of a genre of writing published by intellectual feminists from the west between ten to forty years after Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's publication of *Sultana's Dream* in English, which as far as accounts show remains largely unacknowledged as the mother of the genre of feminist utopias, permits us to highlight and contest the often erroneous notion in scholarship regarding the origin of the pioneering ideas and creativity, as commencing in the west and then being exported to other regions. Begum Rokeya's work also permits us to understand that even within the confines of *zenana*, courage and grit existed as essential qualities amongst innumerable women (and men) who were engaged in acts of cultural and political resistance and reform.

Sultana's Dream and parts of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's major pieces such as *Padmarag (The Rubi),* a selection of *Avarodhbasini (The Secluded Ones)* and *Streejatir Abanati – Woman's Downfall* from Volume I of *Motichur – A String of Sweet Pearls* have recently been, for the first time, academically and critically

appraised in Spanish and translated by Jorge Diego Sánchez.[77] This is without question an invaluable and highly pertinent contribution which opens up Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's writing to a hugely wider audience. On the publication of Jorge Diego Sánchez's volume, Barnita Bagchi states in the foreword:

> Knowing that a selection of writings by the South Asian writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain has been translated into Spanish by Jorge Diego Sánchez is news that fills me with emotion and delight. The life and work of this multi-faceted South Asian Bengali feminist who was a writer, novelist, polemicist, teacher, school administrator and social worker is undoubtedly a source of timeless inspiration. Rokeya is a diamond in the emancipatory struggle of women in South Asia since each of the edges of her life provides beauty and illuminates the darkest parts of human existence (as cited in Diego Sánchez, 2018, p.1).

[77] See: (Diego Sánchez, 2018)

2.3 –THE 1930S; LEADING UP TO POST-INDEPENDENCE

The demand for laws that would implement the necessary reform of women's status within the family often caused significant strife between the nationalists and some feminist voices. Amongst the most important demands on the part of the women's organisations were the right to vote, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the right to divorce and to inherit and control property. During the 1930s, women's organisations grouped themselves into legal committees, studying law, consulting with expert lawyers and other relevant bodies, while also publishing pamphlets and documents about women's rights to legal status. They made powerful demands for legal enactments that would provide women with improved status and rights. In 1934 the AIWC passed a resolution that demanded a change in the laws of marriage and inheritance under what would be known as the *Hindu Code,* (Forbes G. , 1982). Previously, in 1933, a High Court worker from Baroda in the state of Gujarat, west India, had already advocated for the constitution of a government committee to address the issue of the legislative gaps in women's legal status and propose reforms. The Committee was finally appointed in 1941.

However, the period coincided with ever increasing nationalism and the *civil disobedience movement*; with the Indian National Congress boycotting the British government in the thousands leading to numerous imprisonments. As

such, collaboration with The *Hindu Law Committee*, the British government body appointed specifically to deal with the legislation of women's issues began to represent "support for the British and opposition to the Congress, including Gandhi" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 532).

While there were many women within the organisations who did not find the choice to stand with nationalism at the cost of women's issues problematic, there were many others who were not willing to sacrifice the issue of the *Women's Question* for nationalism. Geraldine Forbes highlights the case of Vilasini Devi Shenai, in the sixteenth annual AIWC conference in 1941-1942, offering a powerful argument against placing nationalism above women's issues. "Today our men are clamouring for political rights at the hands of an alien government. Have they conceded their wives, their own sisters, their daughter, 'flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood' social equality and economic justice?" (as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 532).

Meanwhile, in 1929 Gandhi had written an essay titled *The Position of Women in Young India,* in which, according to Rochona Majumdar, he stated that women should not dedicate their energy and time on the question of their legal status, but rather should "focus their attention to more pressing matters" (as cited in Majumdar, 2003, p. 2132), thus directly contradicting the standpoint of the AIWC and other organisations. In January I944 the *Rau Committee,* as it became known was reconstituted to prepare *The Hindu Code*. As Geraldine Forbes points out, the code finally became law between 1955 and 1956, well after independence

due as much to the persistence and lobbying efforts of women's organisations and voices like that of Vilasini Devi Shenai, – who did not abandon the Committee's struggle in the midst of rampant nationalism, – as also, to Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's perseverance in seeing it go through (Forbes G. , 1982).

Independence from British rule achieved at midnight of 14 to 15 August, 1947 saw the completion of the Constitution and a gradual rest in what has generally been known as the "first wave feminism" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 532). The newly independent India and its Indian Constitution offered women absolute equality in legislation. The new enactments were free of social restrictions and new institutions that were aimed at improving women's status were included in the new administration. However, although there have been voices stating that the new legal status for women was merely a result of their active participation in nationalist objectives and the freedom movement, as we have seen previously and as Forbes asserts, a detailed assessment of documents of the time show that "the male leadership of nationalist groups were not united in support of women's rights" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 532).

As examined earlier, not all male leaders agreed with all of the social legislation. The nineteenth century notions of the proposed civil rights and equal rights for women, as a practice meant to reshape homes and families with women in their domestic roles of educated housewives, as their natural full time vocation prevailed amongst many. As such, even in the midst of strong support from figures like Nehru, and Gandhi's version of feminism, the effort that women put into

convincing leaders of the importance and significance of women's political and legal rights cannot be overstated. To use Geraldine Forbes words,

> […] women cared enough about these issues to organize and lobby to obtain them, and that organized women were a force to be reckoned with. That Indian woman had broken through male guardianship to finally attain political and legal status was a significant accomplishment of first wave feminism. (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 533).

Few of the women who were actively involved in the accomplishment of reform legislation were under the illusion that real change would come easily. They were all affiliated with the major women's organisations and in some cases with the nationalist parties. Even while all these organisations, the WIA, AIWC and NCWI were pro-independence, understanding that India necessarily needed the power to enact its own laws for its progress; they varied in their anti-British sentiments. Thus, the women leaders here put great faith in support for their cause on the part of Indian reformers. Even as these women fought for progressive legislation, they were aware that real social change would not come easily or quickly; as such, when writing and making statements about the newly proposed legislation and discussions, women made it clear that their long term objective was to achieve equality. Forbes highlights a statement, which she attributes to Sarojini Naidu, but more plausibly, – as will be deduced from our experience of

her discourse – and as Teresa Hubel asserts, in all likelihood, belongs to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. It states,

> The supreme overlordship of man and particularly of that of the husband is strongly questioned. The women seek to have their own free choice in the selection of partners in life, the right to enter Motherhood when and if they desire, to seek divorce if necessity arises. These are some of the problems upon which the movement is working (as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 533); (as cited in Hubel, 1993 p. 117).

Evidence points to the late 1930s and 40s seeing a distinct change in the tone of the voices of women involved in the women's movement. As Teresa Hubel points out, the statements and texts written by women of the nationalist and social reform movements of this period demonstrate "an angrier and more aggressive tone and a willingness to confront certain issues that had previously been repressed or shunted aside" (Hubel, 1993, p. 114). The initial willingness to maintain a common and united front with the largely male members of Indian National Congress, in order to address the forces of British imperialism comprising not only of British government, but also British residents and Christian missionary organisations, gradually gave way to an increasingly more vocal demand for attention to issues that had been initially relegated to secondary position. It can be inferred that, as Hubel asserts, the reasons for the lack of a predominant position on women's issues initially, was a direct result of "the

emergence of the women's movement in India as an adjunct to the anti-imperialist project" (Hubel, 1993, p. 115).

Even while it is common knowledge that prior to Gandhi's calling women's public participation in organised movements and politics was highly limited; and that many, especially the women who were involved themselves, continued to attribute to Gandhi, as did Lakshmi N. Menon, – activist in the 1930s and 40s agitations for women's rights and Minster of External Affairs in Jawaharlal Nehru's office, – the credit of offering "the women of India the opportunity to break away from the past with all its frustrations" (Menon, as cited in Hubel. 1993, p. 115). There is also increasing evidence of a change in the attitude of reverence towards Gandhi and his close associates, evidenced in the writings and statements of women, as they gained more experience and confidence in their positions and narratives, finding their own leadership and voices.

Hubel states that the change in discourse represented "a rebellion against the orthodoxy" (Hubel, 1993, p. 115) that Gandhi represented. As such, women and a few men, including Jawaharlal Nehru, began to voice opinions that were clearly opposed to Gandhi's position. Hubel asserts that "nowhere is this most apparent than in Chattopadhyaya's works" (Hubel, 1993, p. 119). Amongst the issues highlighted was the demand for the right to "economic independence and the renunciation of the self-sacrificing feminine roles that Indian tradition had assigned to them" (Hubel, 1993, p. 116).

However, it would seem that none of the women activists actually overtly challenged or questioned Gandhi's ideas about women. Even as they maintained stances that were clearly opposing to what Gandhi expressed, they would not admit to contradicting Gandhi's position. Teresa Hubel describes this phenomenon, stating, "Their rebellion goes unconfessed" (Hubel, 1993, p. 120). This is demonstrated in the activists' demands for economic independence, which was clearly contradictory to what Gandhi had voiced on occasions such as in his speech in 1918 and later on; again, more than twenty years later, in 1940, in the Journal, *Harijan.*[78] "I do not believe in women working for a living or undertaking a commercial enterprise" (as cited in Hubel, 1993, p. 120).

In any case, despite Gandhi's position, women forged ahead with what they considered as the priorities, covertly refraining from openly contesting Gandhi who was without a doubt the most influential and important figure of the time, in

[78] *Harijan* was an English language weekly journal started by Gandhi in 1933. The term itself was coined by Gandhi, in referring to the *untouchable* castes of India. It translates literally to 'child of Hari, as in the lord Vishnu'. A champion of the rights of oppressed minorities, Gandhi's noble intention was to eradicate untouchability. However, his coined name for the group has become obsolete and its usage is in fact forbidden in some parts of India, due to the polemic that its usage generated soon after Gandhi's death. Following independence it was met with protests in the years after being considered pejorative and patronising. *Dalit* is now commonly used instead. However Dalit is not always acceptable of endorsed either.

all arenas. The book *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women*, edited by Shyam Kumari Nehru was published in 1938. A compilation of essays on the domestic and public lives of women in India, it portrays certain disillusionment and tiring of Gandhi's rhetoric as well as the supposed emancipation of women from the nationalists' perspective. The essays are clear and harsh in their critique of many of the oppressive customs and traditions of India, and the patriarchal structures that created and maintain these customs. The writings in this compilation show particularly an unwillingness to accept and conform to the fact of the so called 'glorious past' of women as an excuse for the maintenance of customs that are clearly prejudicial to women.

Examples of these critiques can be found in a piece by Shyam Kumari Nehru, the editor of the book, who writes in reference to marriage, which is perceived as a system of slavery, in direct contradiction to Gandhi's narrative of the institution, which he termed as a *spiritual* union.

> It is a cunning device to keep women economically dependent on man, chained within the four walls of the zenana, confined to the performing of household duties alone. Usually marriage is thrust upon her much before she can think for herself, and the tie is indissoluble, (Nehru, as cited in Hubel, 1993, p. 121).

Another writer, G.J. Bahadurji, delivers a harsh and rather brutal verdict in her contribution, under the title *Women and Political Struggle*. Bahadurji describes marriage as

> […] "bondage" that "makes women dependent on men even in their political decisions"; that converts a woman into "a dressed up doll" or a "beast of burden". She further states that motherhood "ensures her lifelong slavery", describing children as "her creations, the bonds that tie her to the yoke of family life, which once entered leaves no room for self-expression, or self-realisation" (Bahadurji, as cited in Hubel, 1993, p. 121).

These were indeed very strong words for the time, in a society that saw as sacrosanct, and continues today, to venerate marriage and motherhood as hallowed and sanctified. By pre independence, women had made it clearer and clearer that their view of the Indian woman's future did not tie in with Gandhi's image of the future Indian woman. Even while speaking of Gandhi's contributions with absolute respect. As Hubel states, "the days of their assimilating his beliefs concerning their lives and their futures were over" (Hubel, 1993, p. 122). At the time Hansa Jivraj Mehta (1897-1995), who was on the constituent assembly that drafted the Indian Constitution, stated that Indian women are entitled to their autonomy, independence, choice of profession and partner and of course, the same system of education as men.

The women's movement in India even while having originally been birthed from the movement for independence became a powerful movement in its own, with women who were "thirsty for education, […] like caged tigers – once the gate was opened, they leaped out" (Dutt, as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 533). As the new

educated women began working with other women in social work, they quickly began to understand the facts of inequality in the system and the patriarchal barriers to women's progress, liberties and independence. They also became rapidly aware of the role of politics in shaping the world. As Helena Dutt stated, "As their consciousness of the world and women's place in it grew, they began to understand the role of political power in shaping that world" (as cited in Forbes, 1982, p. 533).

However, if one is to question whether the women's movement was truly able to improve the conditions for women in India in general, the answer would questionably be a negative. Despite obvious and clear advances since the period immediately following independence, the laws and legislation which were put in place remain, in many instances, largely unenforced. Ultimately, the patriarchal Indian society, up to date, continues to demonstrate a clear and overt reluctance to work towards true emancipation for women. Child marriage, although apparently in declining numbers is still excessively prevalent in India, up to 27 percent of marriages;[79] and few women will take up the legal battle to secure their

[79] See: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/04/child-brides-marriage-shravasti-india-culture/

https://www.thebetterindia.com/138496/india-child-brides-marriage-law-posco/

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/legally-speaking/legal-status-of-child-marriages-in-india/

inheritance. In fact, the opposite case has been recorded; where many women are forced by patriarchal family traditions into a custom called *haq tyag;* that is, to *voluntarily* forego their inheritance rights.[80] The granting of rights has not made the legal system that contains those rights accessible to the vast majority of women; neither is education, beyond the basics, made available within the system or condoned by society at all levels. The *dowry* system and related crimes against women is very much alive; as such, much as the early women activists feared, legislation does not easily translate to a changed social attitudes or reality. Geraldine Forbes uses these words to describe the courage of the women involved and the work achieved by the first wave of feminism in India.

> Looking back at the times in which they worked for social change I think we should marvel that they dared so much and they accomplished so much. Most of these women had grown up in purdah or at least in very sheltered environments. They temporarily left the protection of their homes and families to work in the public arena – a behaviour that was still suspect. They were dependent women – they lived with their families – and often had to tread very carefully to avoid alienating members of their families. These were not women with private incomes and independent identities;

[80] For more about this, see: https://www.reuters.com/article/india-landrights-women/as-property-prices-rise-more-indian-women-claim-inheritance-idUSL8N20Z4XO (Chandran, 2013)

> they were wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and daughters with very few legal rights. In the end, their demands were accepted and formulated as law giving the present generation at least the potential for gender independence and autonomy (Forbes G. , 1982, pp. 534-535).

Forbes further highlights that many of the women still alive who were part of the first wave of Indian feminism continue to be committed to the improvement of women's lives through the enactment of laws, using political channels and institutional structures. As Forbes states, "feminism emerged from behind the purdah […] behind the curtain were not slaves bur 'caged tigers' " (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 535).

2.3.1 HANSA JIVRAJ MEHTA (1897-1995)

Unquestionably amongst the most visionary of women, Hansa Mehta's claims regarding women's rights to equal pay and opportunities continue to be unresolved issues today, not only in India but in many parts of the world.

> Women shall have facilities for training for any profession or occupation that she may choose to follow. She has the right to work and receive the same payment as man for the same amount of work. Even the housewife is entitled to a portion of her husband's income. The Indian woman should have no feeling of dependence on man. […] To learn to think for ourselves is what we need today instead of taking shelter behind Gandhiji's words in everything we do. We have got over what Manu said; we shall have to get over what Gandhiji said (Mehta, as cited in Hubel, 1993, p. 122).

Hansa Mehta was the Brahmin daughter of a liberal, highly educated Gujarati family. Her father, Manubhai Nandshankar Mehta, was the *Dewan* – prime minister – of Baroda. She was also the granddaughter of Nandshankar Mehta, a Gujarati writer and social reformer who is known to have written the first original novel in Gujarati, *Karan Ghelo*. Hansa Mehta was highly educated; she studied Philosophy at *Baroda University* (MSU) and Journalism in England. During her stay in England and later in the United States, Hansa became involved

in the women's movements in the in these countries (Darraj, 2010). She was first introduced to Gandhi by Sarojini Naidu; who she met while studying in London, in 1918. – According to most accounts, she was introduced to Gandhi in 1922, while he was being held in Sabarmati Central Jail in Ahmedabad, in Gujarat.[81] – After meeting Gandhi, Hansa Mehta joined the Nationalist movement becoming an active participant in the Non-Corporation and Swadeshi movements. Similarly to the other women leaders of the period, she organised protests and rallies in favour of self-rule and home grown products, while also championing the issue of women's education and rights.

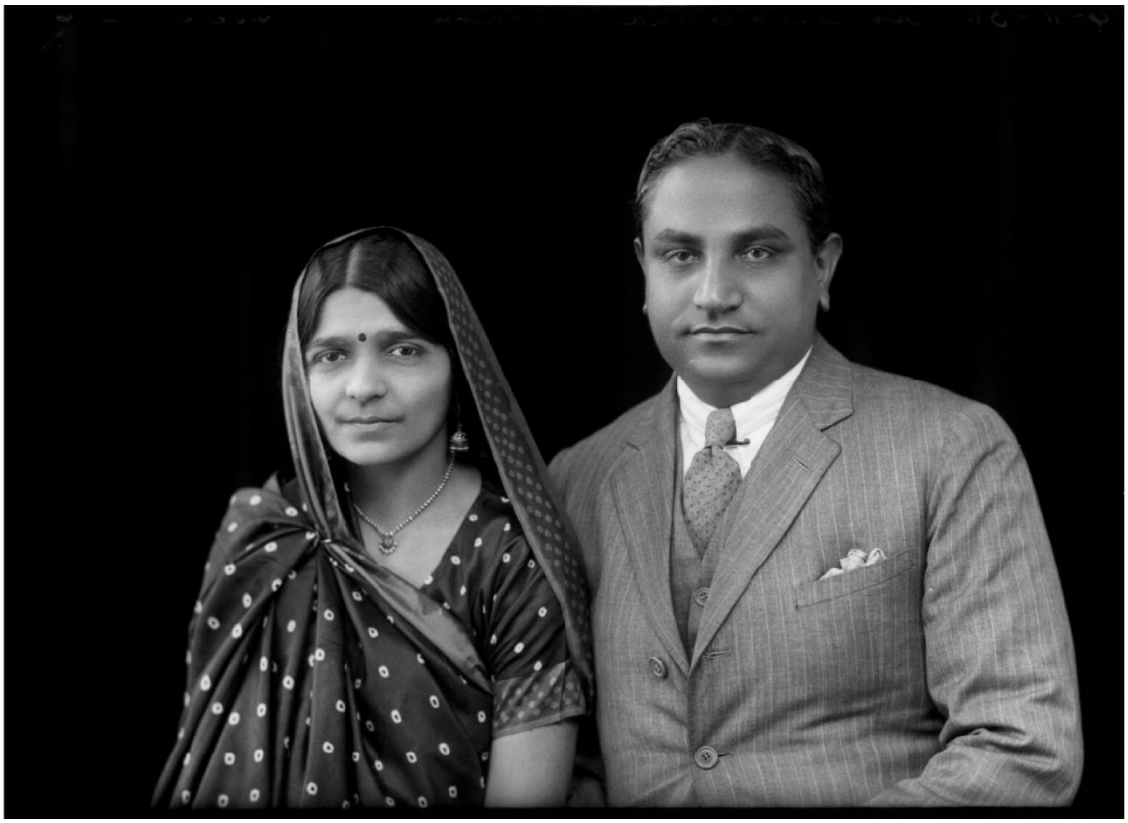
On returning to India, Hansa Mehta married Dr Jivraj Narayan Mehta, a physician and surgeon, who had attended Gandhi as his personal doctor, for a brief period of time. See: (2.3.1) FIGURE - 45. Jivraj Narayan Mehta was the first Dean of the then newly established *Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College* and *King Edward VII Memorial Hospital in Bombay*. He also served as the High Commissioner for India in London and the Minister of Public Works, Finance and Industry in Bombay. A few years later, he became the first Chief Minister of what was then the newly founded state of Gujarat (Pandya, 2016). Jivraj Narayan

[81] There are discrepancies in accounts as to the exact date when Hansa Mehta met Gandhi and as to whether it was during the few days he spent in Sabarmati Jail or whether it was in London, in the early 1920s.

Mehta was from the *Vaisya* caste.[82] As an upper caste *Nagar Brahmin*, Hansa Mehta's intention to marry below her caste caused a major uproar in the Nagar Brahmin community, leading to demonstrations and protests against the union, despite the fact that her parents were not wholly against the match.

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III, a social reformer as well as one of the most progressive rulers of what was the state of Baroda, as well as, questionably, India in general – after whom the University of Baroda was later renamed – was delighted with the inter-caste union. He requested to be invited to all the ceremonies and convinced Hansa's family of the auspiciousness of the match (Mehta, 1981). In referring to the match between Dr Jivraj Narayan and Hansa Mehta, the eminent historian Ramachandra Guha describes Hansa Mehta as "one-half of a great patriotic couple" (Guha, 2019, p. para. 3). Guha also asserts that even as Sardar Patel and Mahatma Gandhi remain alive in the memory of Indians and amongst the people of the state of Gujarat in particular, Hansa Mehta has, as apparently per custom, been largely forgotten, even in her home state.

[82] Also known as *Vaishya*, this is the third out of the four main castes or *varnas* in Hinduism. For more detailed information regarding the different castes, see: https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/sociology-general-terms-and-concepts/vaisya



(2.3.1) FIGURE - 45

A – Hansa Mehta and her husband, Jivraj Narayan Mehta, (9 November 1931). Photograph by Bassano Ltd. [Half-plate glass negative]. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, UK. Photographs Collection (NPG).
Retrieved from:
https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw194168/Mrs-Hansa-Mehta-Jivraj-Narayan-Mehta

Hansa Mehta was not only active in the nationalist movement; she was one of the most vocal voices for education, social justice and true equality. She was a prolific writer of Gujarati children's books and also a translator of Western writers, such as Shakespeare, into Gujarati, (Darraj, 2010). She held the presidency of the AIWC between 1946 and 1947, just prior to independence. As a

member of several committees – including the *Fundamental Rights* sub-committee – of the constituent assembly, she was able to make some of her most important contributions. Her position on the *Sarda Act* – to abolish child marriage – and her fight to frame the *Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties* (IWCRD), – which was presented in 1946, in the 18th session of the AIWC held in Hyderabad, (Goled, 2019) – and the *Uniform Civil Code* (UCC) were determining.

The IWCRD embodied the spirit of progressive politics, seeking to establish legislation and policies that secured women with equal civic rights and pay, access to health care and education, as well as fair distribution of property, property rights and marriage laws applicable equally to men and women (Wangchuk, 2018); (Ravichandran P. , 2016). Hansa Mehta made it very clear that women did not seek preferential treatment, but social, political and economic equality. "The women's organisation to which I have the honour to belong has never asked for reserved seats, for quotas, or for separate electorates. What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice, and political justice," (as cited in Wangchuk, 2018, para. 24).

Hansa Mehta was strongly against the common norm of *personal laws* and sought to establish legislation of what would be a common civil code instead. Her inclusion in the Fundamental Rights sub-committee was a critical and determining factor in the fight for gender equality and common civil code, as opposed to the personal laws, which unfortunately, continue to govern minority communities in India today. As evidence of her visionary foresight, alongside luminary figures

like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, and Manoo Masani, Hansa Mehta sought to make the UCC a justiciable part of the Indian Constitution; as a way forward she understood that it would be a provision that would effectively prevent future civil strife and conflict, and make the state responsible for creating a single Indian identity, above and across the existing multiple religious identities. In her arguments, she stated that,

> The Civil Code that we wish to have must be on a par with, or in advance of, the most progressive of the personal laws in the country. Otherwise, it will be a retrograde step, and it will not be acceptable to all, (Mehta, as cited in Awasthi, 2018, para. 9); (Wangchuk, 2018, p. para. 26).

Unfortunately, the motion was overturned; it met with opposition from even the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. As a result, the UCC remained, but a simple, non-judicial compromise in a set of *Directive Principles*, (Ravichandran P. , 2016); (Wangchuk, 2018). Hansa Mehta stated, "Any evil practiced in the name of religion cannot be guaranteed by the Constitution. Unfortunately, we were told that raising this question will hurt the religious susceptibilities of some people," (as cited in Wangchuk, 2018, para. 25). In effect a tragedy of history, it shall never be known how a properly enforced judiciary UCC, one that legally criminalised the persecution of religious minorities, and provided equal rights to all communities, castes and religions; might have contributed to saving millions of

lives and effectively calming or even eliminating the never ending troubled waters of religious and cultural strife that have plagued India throughout modern history.

Amongst its objectives, the 1946 newly formed Constituent Assembly aimed to draft a Constitution for the soon to be independent India. Out of 299 members there were 15 women who participated in what Ravichandran describes as "an extraordinary project – an experiment that would determine the ability of a country to govern itself" (Ravichandran P. , 2016, p. para.3). Most of these women were the lawyers, reformists, suffragists, freedom fighters and politicians who were also members of the AIWC and other women's organisations.

The process of drafting the Indian Constitution took just under three years, requiring 11 sessions held over 165 days. On November 22, 1949, a draft was finally approved by the committee (Wangchuk, 2018). When the committee drafted the *Hindu Code Bill*, Hansa Mehta ensured the amendment certain areas of the bill that initially violated areas of civil rights of women, safeguarding them from interpretation through the religious texts, a position that continued to be upheld by some of the orthodox, but highly influential members of the members and community (Wangchuk, 2018). She was fully aware that the modifications would not be easy to enforce and the Bill was not without its failings; as such she stated,

> This Bill to codify the Hindu Law is a revolutionary Bill and though we are not quite satisfied with it, it will be a great landmark in the social history of the Hindus. But since this Bill was drafted, many things have happened, and

> one of the biggest things that has happened is the achievement of our political freedom. The new State is going to be a democratic State and democracy is based on the equality of individuals. It is from this point of view that we have now to approach the problems of inheritance and marriage, etc., that are before us, (as cited in Wangchuk, 2018, para. 33).

Hansa Mehta's position on the *Sarda Act* for the abolition of child marriage and the practice of *Devadasi*[83] as well as the liberty to use contraceptive measures was particularly vehement. She proposed an amendment to the resolution on child marriage that did not simply penalize child marriage but actually invalidated the marriage as null. Her proposal provoked "heated debate" as she was described as "representing the views of the younger generation of women at the conference" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 163). The proposal went against the orthodox laws of Hindu marriage, according to the scriptures; resulting finally in a resolution of penalization for marriages of girls under 16 but not in invalidation of the actual marriage.

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[83] Examined in other areas of this study, Devadasi, – literally servant of God – refers to the practice in parts of South India in which young girls are forced to dedicate their lives to the service of the goddess *Yellamma,* as in married to the God. They actually end up as sex slaves. For more on this see: https://yourstory.com/2017/04/devadasis-india https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/21/devadasi-india-sex-work-religion

To understand the political implications and forces that were involved in implementing, what in actual fact was a far from adequate social legislation on issues of domestic and marital practices of the time, we will delve a little further into the process of establishing the *Sarda Act*. The publication, in 1927, of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* –already mentioned in this study – marked what can only be described as a "tipping point for an important historical transformation between two world wars" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 1). Sinha further elaborates how events unfolded. This represented a publication that

> […] cascaded through a global network of social structures and public spheres to produce […] a massive international controversy that raged across three continents with great intensity […]. Even before Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) or Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* 1994), there was Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 1).

As Sinha asserts, by relying on what were powerful social bodies in the United States as well as British officials in India and her socio journalistic skills, Mayo wrote "what became one of the most sensational exposés on India. *Mother India* provided graphic details of a variety of social ills in India, especially as they affected the position of women" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 1). One of the most determining factors to the uproar the book arouse lay in that Mayo laid the blame

of the conditions she described in her book on what she described as the "inherently backward Hindu Culture" (as cited in Sinha, 2006, p. 1).

The title, *Mother India* took advantage of the nationalist construct which represented the nation as mother, in an overt political intervention to create a case against the ability of the country to be granted self-rule, due to the supposedly inherent social backwardness of Indian society and men, as portrayed in the book. The political message of the book drew immediate international attention from all walks of life; legislators, political figures, social reformers and women activists, as well as journalists, writers, artists, doctors. Men and women from every field took to participating in private and public debates and rallies against the book.

The magnitude of the controversy of *Mother India* and its international reach can be appreciated from the number of reprints and multiple editions that were published, as well as the languages into which it was translated. It was translated into Swedish, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Danish, and, Hebrew. The Indian language translations were Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil and Telugu. According to the original publishers, *Harcourt Brace and Company*, 395,678 copies of the book had been sold by 1955 (Sinha M. , 2006). Sinha further asserts that the book was also reviewed in most of the major publications of the period in the United States, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. "Even though the heart of the controversy over *Mother India* was located in the United States, Britain and India, its ripples spread far and wide. […] The reach of the book was phenomenal" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 2).

The controversy raised by the battle between the "impassioned" critics and supporters of what the *Times* of London had dubbed as the "Legend of *Mother India*" maintained it in spotlight all through the 1920s and 30s, (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 2). The book was debated in diverse public platforms in the United States, Britain and India, and was also burnt in public protests, while being the centre of many protest meetings around the world. As stated previously, it was famously dubbed by Gandhi as *The Drain Inspector's Report.* Sinha asserts that, "Except for Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, few books have ever come close to matching *Mother India* in provoking such fury and such vehement support across several continents" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 2).

The contexts of the political and social reasons across the world for such controversy were diverse, however, here, our interest lies in the context of the period as related to granting India political independence. Katherine Mayo represents for most Indians *Imperialist Propaganda* that, nonetheless, as must be accepted, ultimately led to the highly significant, social reform legislation, passed on September 28, 1929, after much public pressure. *The Child Marriage Restraint Act*, which fixed the minimum age of marriage for girls at 14, was framed as a penal law meant to bypass the diverse religious *personal laws* making it applicable across all of society; although according to records, the law in reality was rarely enforced. The later amendment, in 1930, for the minimum marriage age first to 16 and later to 18 years for girls and from 18 to 21 for boys became the revised *Sarda Act*.

The Sarda Act represented a major change in the prevailing norms of the period that separated domestic issues from social legislation. "The Sarda Bill, representing the nationalist appropriation of the domain of the state, provided and unprecedented opportunity for realigning the political with the social in colonial India" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. 163). The original 1929 Bill was highly flawed and inadequate, and most activists recognised its short comings. In 1938, the original *Sarda Act* was amended, although still to the dissatisfaction of many, including Hansa Mehta. Hansa Mehta, who at the time was the joint secretary of the *Bhagini Samaj* women's society, communicated the Society's scepticism of the Bill as it was; its clear ineffectiveness as a legal measure that merely penalized early marriage with the same meagre fine as a minor offence, without annulling the marriage as illegal. Hansa Mehta also made an extensive argument for the bill to include a clear definition of marriage as a "strictly monogamous and equal contract" (as cited in Sinha M., 2006, p. 164).

In 1946, the *United Nations Commission on the Status of Women* (UNCSW) was set up; Hansa Mehta was assigned to represent India on the Commission (Bagchi, 2016). In the first session of the *Human Rights Commission* (HRC), held at Lake Success, in New York, from January 27 to February 10, 1947, the only women members were Eleanor Roosevelt and Hansa Mehta (Glendon, 2001). One month after the first meeting of the *Human Rights Commission*, on their request the draft bill of the Declaration of Human Rights was shared with members of the UNCSW. During the unfolding of events in the drafting process of the *Universal*

Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Hansa Mehta made what Ramachandra Guha has described as "a contribution of truly global significance" (Guha, 2019, p. para. 3).

The very first proposed Article of the Declaration, Article 1, which is also the foundation block on what the whole Charter is based proved to be amongst the most difficult to draft. Initially, it began, "All men are brothers…" (Glendon, 2001, p. 89). Hansa Mehta opposed the use of the phrase 'all men', warning the league that the term *men* would be misconstrued in some countries to refer literally to men, leaving women and girls excluded from the Charter. Records show that Eleanor Roosevelt did not recognise the initial wording to be a problem, stating that she considered that "*all men* included everyone" (as cited in Glendon, 2001, p. 90). However, Hansa Mehta was aware from her long experience in India battling purdah, child marriage, polygamy, prejudicial inheritance laws, and many other ills based on ancient customs that she was fighting to eliminate; that nothing as far as equal rights for women were concerned could be taken for given. Mehta was insistent that the statement, which today would clearly have been considered non-inclusive, be altered. As a result, "she made sure the Declaration spoke with power and clarity about equal rights for women well before they were recognised in most legal systems" (Glendon, 2001, p. xx). See: (2.3.1) FIGURE - 46 A & B. Barnita Bagchi also points out that Hansa Mehta's work and her demands offered a stark and clear picture of "the importance and simultaneous elusiveness of rights-based activism to further gender equality" (Bagchi, 2016, p. 109).

Susan Muaddi Darraj also highlights that Hansa Mehta's long experience in the struggle for women's rights and progressive laws in India, – which gained independence in August of the same year, – made her well aware of the ineffectiveness of legislation lacking in appropriate enforcement measures. As such, she insisted that the document written up by the commission "have some *teeth*, some method of enforcement to ensure that the nations that signed it would fulfill their obligations" (Darraj, 2010, p. 55). Hansa Mehta and the Australian representative, William Hodgson, had sought to enact a document that would be legally binding, such as a covenant. They were "adamant that an international bill of rights would be meaningless without some machinery for enforcement" (Glendon, 2001, p. 38). Both Mehta and Hodgson very strongly advocated for a human rights court as essential for the establishment of an effective "international bill of rights" (UN Commission on Human Rights 1947, as cited in Hoover, 2013, p. 27).

Neither Hansa Mehta nor William Hodgson were to be easily overcome. Mary Ann Glendon states,

> Low-voiced Mrs. Mehta combined the assurance of a member of the Brahmin caste with a fierce dedication to women's rights and national self-determination. […] Noisy Colonel Hodgson, a champion of the interests of small nations, was one of Australia's leading experts in international relations. […] Hodgson put forward a proposal for an entirely new sort of legal institution–an International Court of Human Rights that could hear the

complaints from individuals that their rights had been infringed by their own governments (Glendon, 2001, p. 38).

(2.3.1) FIGURE - 46 A & B

A – The Commission Chairman, Eleanor Roosevelt (right) with Hansa Mehta of India, (1949). Retrieved from: https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/70-years-of-impact-insights-on-the-universal-declaration-of-human-rights/

B – Marvin Bolotsky / UN, (1949). Hansa Mehta, from India (on the left), with Carlos García Bauer, representative of Guatemala, in a session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, in Lake Success, New York, (June 1949). Retrieved from:https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/humanos-iguales-declaracion-universal-derechos_0_844816206.html

Hansa Mehta also upheld the opinion that individuals as well as states should be allowed access to the UN Human Rights Commission and that the Commission should be enabled to take action on these. Hansa Mehta remained dissatisfied with what she felt was a Charter lacking the legal measures to secure its enforcement. Glendon states that

> At later meetings she persisted in her efforts to make Article 1 more inclusive. Her changes were finally accepted at the third and last meeting of the full commission, in June 1948. They helped to place the Declaration far ahead of most of the world's rights instruments in the clarity with which it affirmed women's equality (Glendon, 2001, p. 92).

Mehta also asked that there be a specific bill on Human Rights which should be made an integral part of the Charter and a fundamental law of the UN. As it happens, the final version of the UDHR, which was voted and adopted on December 10 1948, excluded all these propositions (Sluga, 2017). Sluga further points out that, "Despite Mehta's protests, the UDHR also enshrined the family as 'the natural and fundamental group unit of society…entitled to protection by the society and the state' and yoked together the needs of women as mothers with those of children" (Sluga, 2017, p. 80).

Hansa Mehta's arguments for Bills that would specifically address violation of individual rights, including specifically women's rights, and particularly within the inner domain of *family* are examples of her ingenious foresight. In her speech in response to the final draft of the UDHR she expressed her clear disappointment with what she felt were the ineffective measures of implementation of the Charter, as well as her fears and scepticisms regarding the true enforcement of the declaration. "I cannot say that I feel as exhilarated as I did when we adopted the draft universal declaration of human rights. We have not found solutions on some

of the fundamental points. The measures of implementation are not adequate" (Mehta, p. n. p).

In 1949, after the end of the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly, Mehta returned to her native home in Gujarat and was appointed as the first Vice Chancellor of the *Maharaja Sayajirao* (MS) University of Baroda. Guha asserts of the period that "no major American or British university could have contemplated appointing a female vice-chancellor" (Guha, 2019, p. para. 4). Bagchi also notes that Mehta was a "highly proactive vice-chancellor from 1945 to 1960" (Bagchi, 2016, p. 107). As the vice-chancellor of the MS University, Hansa Mehta appointed a pan-Indian body of scholars to develop what became the highest ranked faculty of fine arts in the country as well as programs of excellence in the sciences and humanities. Guha states

> Among the non-Gujaratis whom Hansa Mehta appointed to professorial posts were the country's leading sociologist, M.N. Srinivas, who was a native of Mysore; and a Tamil couple, C.V. and Rajalakshmi Ramakrishnan, he a biochemist, she a psychologist. The Ramakrishnans had two children; both of whom took their first degrees in Baroda. The girl, Lalita, is now a professor at Cambridge; the boy, Venkatraman (Venki), went on to win a Nobel Prize. (Guha, 2019, p. para 4).

In 1950 Hansa Mehta took up the position of the vice chairman of the UN *Human Rights Constitution* and also became a member of the executive board of

UNESCO (Bagchi, 2016). Bagchi highlights that apart from negotiating decisions in international forums, Mehta had gone to great pains to emphasize the importance of including the involvement of the Commission on the Status of Women in the drafting of the UDHR. Bagchi further points out that few scholars are aware of the fundamental role that Mehta played making the issue of women's rights a central part of public activism in India before partition (Bagchi, 2016). According to Glenda Sluga, Mehta drew on her experience with the AIWC; inspired by already formulated Indian models of rights that she had been participant in establishing, when voicing the dire need for a Charter of Rights for women that established "the freedom of women and her equality with man, equality of identity" (Sluga, 2017, p. 80).

The UDHR has been described as "one of the most important documents of the 20th century […] ground-breaking […], a milestone in the history of human rights, […] it sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected" (Raynaldo, 2018, p. para. 1). On occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Declaration, an exhibit was held at the UN New York headquarters. In the opening speech, on December 6, 2018, António Guterres, the UN Secretary General stated

> Over the past seven decades, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has had a revolutionary impact. The Declaration is universal not only in its very nature but also in its reach. […] It has unleashed the power of

> women's full participation and spurred the fight against discrimination and racism (Guterres, 2018, p. para. 1).

Guterres also acknowledged the sad and common knowledge that the Declaration has far from met its objective to eradicated violation of human rights worldwide. As it stands, there is an arduously long way remaining to truly achieving universal respect for human rights. He further highlights Hansa Mehta's essential role in ensuring that we are today discussing *Human Rights* and not the *Rights of Man* (Guterres, 2018, p. para. 4). In her speech, also regarding the wording of Article 1 of the Declaration, María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the UN General Assembly pays homage to what she terms the *driving force* of the women involved in the drafting and adoption of the Declaration. She states, "Women such as Hansa Mehta (from India) who changed the phrase 'All men are born free and equal' to 'All human beings are born free and equal.' What a big change… what importance this has nowadays" (as cited in Raynaldo, 2018, para. 4). Devaki Jain has pointed out that the change in reading from 'all men to all human beings' might also have marked the beginning of the usage of *human* within the UN seen most visibly in the phrase *Human Development* (Jain & Kakarala, 2005, p. 77).

2.3.1 DEVAKI JAIN (1933)

"Sometimes a lifetime is lived in a moment and sometimes, decades go by in a flash". This phrase introduces the short film titled *Eighty Years Is Not Enough*, by Vani Subramanian,[84] which was made to celebrate the occasion of Devaki Jain's eightieth birthday on November 18, 2013. At the beginning of the film, Bimla Bisell[85] describes her first encounter with Devaki Jain in the early sixties. She describes the experience in glowing terms, as meeting with this extraordinary person, unlike anyone she had ever known, this "creature with a brilliant, illuminated face, clad in a *khadi* saree, diamonds sparkling in her nose and ears and talking a great game of development, politics, grassroots, the whole works" (Subramanian, 2013, pp. min. 0:45-1:16). Indeed, as one examines Devaki Jain's life's work, one cannot but fail to be filled with awe, inspiration and admiration; alongside a keen sense of responsibility to try to ensure that what she has fought so hard to achieve continues its invaluable momentum.

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[84] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCg7_rDbSJk

[85] Bimla Bisell is considered to be amongst Delhi's intellectual and cultural personas; she was married to the late John Bissell, American businessman who settled in India and established an export business of Indian handloom textiles.

Devaki Jain is an eminent, internationally recognised development economist, activist, lecturer and writer. She is known for her pioneering work in feminist economics and her efforts spanning a period of more than forty years of activism for economic acknowledgment and recognition of women's labour, women's empowerment, and rights (Hindustantimes, 2006). She graduated in Economics from Oxford in 1963 and went on to lecture at Delhi University for a period of six years. Her academic research and discourse have focused principally on people centred development, women's rights and equity being informed significantly from a Gandhian perspective.

She has been amongst the founders and a member of an innumerable number of progressive organisations, including the *Institute of Development Alternatives for Women for a new Era* (DAWN) – an organisation of women scientists who worked on developing alternative strategies and frameworks to advance the cause of marginalised women. She also participated in establishing *The Indian Association of Women's Studies* (IAWS), the now extremely well-known feminist publishing house, *Kali*, the *Institute of Social Studies Trust* (ISST) – a centre of research located in Delhi which she also directed until 1994. She was also a member of the erstwhile *South Commission*, from 1987 to 1990, chaired by Dr Julius Nyerere, she was one of twenty six economists invited to analyse and develop an economic cooperation action agenda for the South-South (Jain D. , 2015).

Devaki Jain's work in these organisations led her to travel extensively world-wide as a participant and a member of diverse Committees. She was the Chair of the Advisory Committee on Gender for the United Nations Centre in Asia Pacific as well as a member of the Advisory Committees and Expert Groups of the United Nations, UNESCO, UNICEF and the WHO, amongst others. Devaki Jain has also partnered numerous other committees, such as the *Advisory Committee for UNDP Human Development Report on Poverty*, 1997 and the *Eminent Persons group* in connection with the *Graca Machel Committee* (UN) on the *Impact of Armed Conflict* on children (Jain D. , 2015).

Working with women's organisations and networks she has participated actively in the *Women's Movement* both in India and around the world. She examined and researched women's issues helping to provide visibility and voices across the nation to grassroot women's organisations such as *SEWA* – examined in detail further ahead, – in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Devaki Jain is also actively involved in community movements, projects and alliances such as the *Nationals Alliance of People's Movements* (NAPM) and the *National Centre for Labour* (NCL) a coalition of unions of unorganised labour. She is a founding member of the highly prestigious *International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility* (INES) – an organisation of scientists for peace, founded in 1991 and inspired on the teachings of British Nobel Laureate, Bertrand Russell. INES aims to promote worldwide communication amongst scientists and engineers with the objective of securing international peace, security, sustainable

development and responsible use of science and technology so as to ensure human survival.[86]

In the 1995 Beijing Conference, Devaki Jain was one of two women to be awarded the highly prestigious *Bradford Morse Memorial Award* by the *United Nations Development Program* (UNDP) in recognition of her outstanding achievements in promoting the advancement of women and gender equality both through her professional and voluntary work (Jain D. , 2015). In 2006, she was also awarded the third highest civilian award in India, the *Padma Bhushan*; for her lifetime commitment to social justice and women's empowerment (The Hindu, 2006). Unsurprisingly, Aishhwariya Subramanian describes Devaki Jain as having had an "astonishingly prolific life and career" as "a development economist, who has long been smashing barriers in India and fighting poverty using Gandhian philosophy" (Subramanian, 2013, p. para. 2). This examination of Devaki Jain's lifetime contribution towards the empowerment of women and the creation of economically just societies, not only in India, but worldwide, will be based largely on her own studies and writings, which are truly extensive.

Devaki Jain was born in the beautiful city of Mysore, in the south west state of Karnataka. Her father was M. A. Sreenivasan (1897–1998), an important figure who was the Minister and also the Trade Commissioner of Mysore in London. She

[86] For further details, visit: http://inesglobal.net/ineshome/founding-statement/

studied Mathematics and Economics at Mysore University, graduating and receiving no less than three gold medals for achieving the highest position in English, Mathematics and overall performance. She then went on to acquire a Master's Degree in Economics from St. Anne's College at Oxford University (Jain D. , 2015). As we have seen, Jain's credentials are nothing short of outstanding; she has held visiting fellowships at several universities and institutes, including Harvard, Boston, the World Development institute, the Scandinavian Institute for Asian Studies in Copenhagen and Sussex University. She has also received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Westville, Durban Republic of South Africa, for her contribution to international development and has written extensively on women's roles, contribution and unrecognised participation in economic and social development worldwide (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017).

Devaki Jain had just arrived back to India in 1956, having completed a diploma in Social Sciences at Ruskin College, Oxford. She states, she went on to join the research department of the Indian Cooperative Union (ICU) that had been founded by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. Devaki Jain describes the ICU as *a space* that had been created by Kamaladevi, asserting that "Kamaladevi did not build institutions but created spaces, spaces where people joined and worked free of the binds of institutions" (Jain D. , 2017, p. location 6928). Devaki Jain states that the experience she gained working in the *democratic institutional space* of the ICU opened her eyes to new models of economics based on the Gandhi's ethics.

Gandhi, she believed, "had figured out the most relevant economic engines for our country" (Jain D. , 2017, p. location 6935).

Here Devaki Jain talks about her experiences, in particular, when working with Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982), nee *Acharya*, – as in teacher – the humanitarian founder of the *Bhoodan Gramdan* movement. *Bhoodan* translated literally to *Gift of the Land* in Sanskrit, which came to be known as the *Land-Gift Movement,* was to become the first mass movement of independent India. It was an extremely unusual and unlikely social success story, albeit, for a limited period of time. Vinoba Bhave, who is considered to be the spiritual heir to Gandhi, has been called *The King of Kindness,* by journalist, Mark Shepard, and author of *Gandhi Today.* He was an unknown, retiring social reformer, and member of Gandhi's ashram or ascetic community in Sabarmati, Gujarat, in west India. He was also active in the movement for independence, having been imprisoned on numerous occasions during the 1920s and 30s, and for an extended period of five years in the 1940s; due to his participation in non-violent resistance.

Following independence Bhave lived a simple and austere life, dedicating his time to helping villagers and vulnerable groups. In 1951, while he was visiting villages in the province of Andhra Pradesh, in South East India, he was offered a small portion of land in response to his petition to powerful landowners on behalf of some landless *Dalits.* Thus started his movement, which consisted in walking from village to village persuading rich landowners to donate small portions of land, about one sixth, to be redistributed to the landless; based on what Bhave

advocated as being part of the philosophy of *Ahimsa,* as in giving through non-violence. Bhave advocated that *Land Reform* policies should originate from generosity and a change in heart rather than enforced government action. All the land collected was reorganised into cooperative systems owned by the landless villagers.

According to S.K, by April 1958, Bhoodan had managed to amass five million acres of donated land, (approximately 20,235 square kilometres), (S.K., 1958); which despite being much less than the 50 million that he had aimed to gather in seven years, was significant in terms of readdressing the strategy of the application of force, as in the violent and bloody communist inspired riot of peasants in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh. S.K. asserts that more than 3000 villages were reorganised with landowners willingly "surrendering all property rights to the village community and cultivating land either individually or collectively" (S.K., 1958, p. 488).

Through ICU, which was involved in rural development, Devaki Jain began working closely with Vinoba Bhave, going on later to write a paper on the *Bhoodan Gramdan,* which also, in her words, gave her "clear ideas on what was wrong with the economics that we were teaching and to which we were evidently subscribing" (Jain D. , 2017, p. location 6935). Devaki Jain also asserts that this was "the beginning of my first shot at this whole issue of inequality and injustice, and has been the strum of my life's work ever since" (Jain D. , 2017, p. location 6935).

In 1975, Devaki Jain edited and published *Indian Women*, a book that was to "permanently change the way women in the developing world are treated, and considered, from historical, social and economic perspectives" (Thomas, 2014, p. para. 1). Devaki Jain worked closely with the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, – whose exemplary person and pioneering work have been examined further ahead in this study. – Kamaladevi was her mentor and guide for many years and in the acknowledgments of *Indian Women,* Devaki Jain mentions her contribution. She states that Kamaladevi's direct influence on her began when she started writing *Indian Women,* which was to be the Indian government's contribution to the first UN conference on women which was held in Mexico in 1975. In Devaki Jain's own words, "I had no clue how to go about it. So, on the advice of my husband, I went to Kamaladevi, and she was delighted to guide me. She designed the contents, asked so and so to write this, and so and so to write that; and she herself wrote the opening essay" (Jain D. , 2017, p. location 6947).

It was in the late 1960s that *Indian Women* was originally conceived, as part of a special issue of the intellectual magazine *Seminar,* by the eminent art historian Romila Thapar's brother, Romesh (1922–1987), and his wife Raj (1926–87), Thapar. Romesh Thapar was a Marxist intellectual, journalist and political commentator, and founding editor of *Seminar*. Devaki Jain recounts that Romila Thapar, who at the time was "making waves as a historian of ancient India" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xii) persuaded her to make a contribution to the special issue. At the same time, the editor of the Publications Division of the Government of India

sought to celebrate the establishment of 1975 as *International Women's Year* with a book that projected an up to date, modern take on Indian women, as a replacement of an earlier book titled *Women of India,* written in the 1950s by Tara Ali Baig.

"Perceiving the world, its people, its ideas and its adventures through a gender lens shakes one up, as it distorts if not challenges whatever reality we may have known before we peered into the world through this lens" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xi). It was around about 1967, Jain states that by this time she had had five years' experience teaching Economics, at Miranda House College of Delhi University, and thus, as an academic in the complete senses of the word,

> […] jumping into the field of women's studies and thereby the women's movement was a transforming experience. Most of the knowledge I had inherited needed to be upturned if not abandoned. From being a neutral observer of the world and its phenomena, I became political. The characteristics of every sphere, mental of physical, as I had known them earlier changed as a result of looking at the world through this gendered lens and with the feminist mind" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xi).

Regarding the book to celebrate *International Women's Year*, Jain continues, "I knew almost nothing of the subject. It seemed too vast a domain […] so I decided to make it an edited volume" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xiii). Devaki Jain sought out contributions from her academic connections at the University of

Delhi, 'great scholars', as she called them, as well as journalists and experts from other countries; she urged them to delve into their experiences "drawing them out of their disciplines to consider the status of Indian women" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xiii). *Indian Women* remains a landmark study today; from a historical perspective, many of the articles continue to be relevant to understanding the state of Indian women today as regards numerous issues which remain pending; in terms of gender violence, employment figures, unpaid labour, social, legal and political matters, as well as access to healthcare and education.

Ashish Bose (1930-2014) at the time a prominent demographer and analyst, Fellow at Delhi University, and head of the Population Research Centre, offered highly worrying study tracing the Indian sex ratio disparity over a period of 70 years, from 1901 to 1971. Bose referred back to one of the very first books on India's population published in the twentieth century by Annie Besant. Besant had highlighted the horrendous figures and statistics of child widows, as well as the grievous death toll amongst young women between the ages of 15 and 30, and massive illiteracy rates (Bose A. , 1975).

Despite certain progress, at the time of the publication of *Indian Women*, as was the case then, many of the issues that Annie Besant raised continue to plague India today.[87] Ashish Bose in turn used official census figures to draw attention to

[87] See: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-editorials/worrying-sex-ratio-trends-among-states/

(continuación de la nota al pie)

the increasingly decreasing female numbers as compared to male in the population. In 1901 there were 972 female births to 1000 male. By 1971 this figure had decreased to 930. Additionally, the mortality rate of new-born babies showed the chilling reality, not only of illegal sex selected abortions, but the death of new-born female babies and 0 to 6 year olds from neglect or outright murder (Bose A. , 1975). Nobel laureate Amartya Sen drew international attention to the issue in 1992, in a seminal article in which he coining the phrase *Missing Women*, putting the figure at 23 million missing women in India (Sen A. , Missing Women, 1992).[88]

Indian Women elaborated on numerous aspects of women and womanhood, treating issues that had not been discussed or raised previously. Areas covered include the general position of women in society; the dichotomy of goddess worship versus abuse of women; school, marriage and the upbringing of young

http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Library/Provisional_Population_Total_link/PDF_Links/chapter6.pdf

https://www.thehindu.com/data/India-falls-short-in-female-literacy/article16080505.ece

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5847257/

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Women-68-of-adult-illiterates-in-India/articleshow/46858029.cms

[88] See also: https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/indias-missing-women-2/

https://www.ifes.org/news/indias-37-million-missing-women

girls; women in the labour market, nurses and nuns of Kerala; women in the performing arts and politics; rural women and village women from Rajasthan; Muslim, tribal and women from other minority groups; women in the slums of Bombay and prostitutes in a rescue home. Article authors include Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Romila Thapar, politician and activist, Laksmi M. Menon, sociologist, Andre Beteille, Urdu writer and journalist Qurratulain Hyder, economist and scholar, Ashok Rudra, amongst many others. Devaki Jain asserts,

> It was the journey of compiling this volume of essays that led me to both respect for women and a concern for the inequality between men and women, and even more the huge gap in the knowledge about that inequality. The volume was released by the president of India in 1975, commemorating the International Women's Year announced by the United Nation (UN), and was taken to Mexico as India's official submission (Jain D. , 2018, p. xiv).

Following the publication of *Indian Women*, Devaki Jain was able to use her contacts with academics and professionals to set up the organisations which would provide the fundamental institutional foundations for generation of funds that would permit continued research through fieldwork and data gathering alongside the implementation of programs that could provide employment and poverty reduction. Laxmi Chand Jain and Professor Raj Krishna (1925-1985),

from the Delhi School of Economics established the officially registered *Institute of Social Studies Trust* (ISST). Devaki Jain states:

> With the support of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and using this registered society, I plunged into data collection on these inequalities, expanding into the collection of information on women's economic roles as well as their capacity to work together, to co-operate in strengthening their economic spaces. The studies led to reports and books, each revealing not only the extraordinary capabilities of women, but the depth and width of their role in the Indian economy (Jain D. , 2018, p. xiv).

Devaki Jain relates that at the same time, other initiatives in diverse institutes around India were also bringing to light women's capabilities as well as the discrimination and neglect to which they were often victims. Consequently, Madhuri Ratilal Shah (1919), who at the time was the chairperson of the *University Grants Commission*, in Delhi, supported the establishment of the *Indian Association for Women's Studies* (IAWS) for which Devaki Jain was one of the founding members. Devaki Jain carried out studies funded by the government regarding the impact of diverse schemes on communities through field visits all over India led her to *discover* the innumerable innovative and self-empowering projects and organisations that women themselves had initiated and formed. Devaki Jain states that she discovered that women, by themselves, were capable of

"forming institutions or even informal collectives to strengthen themselves, increase their income, or resist unwanted intrusion" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xv).

Following this, as a group, Devaki Jain and fellow scholars form the ISST and ICSSR published a series of books and articles highlighting the major errors in the generalised perception of women as *beneficiaries* of support and help, usually categorised as *welfare*; a system that they assert effectively concealed what Jain describes as "women's extraordinary intelligence […] the power of women to work together across various boundaries in society and the economy – the boundaries of caste, religion and location" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xv). Devaki Jain states that this realisation opened up the possibility and potential of altering the traditional approach and understanding of economic development, from the concepts of offering "*handouts,* to supporting women's own organisational strengths and goals" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xv).

Thus, one of Devaki Jains most significant contributions to feminism not only in India, but globally, was the reorientation, not only of government, policy makers' and donors' viewpoints, but also that of women and women's movements themselves. She emphasised the vital necessity towards a generalised focus based on the acknowledgment and recognition of their 'extraordinary minds', their skills and collective efforts, their survival strategies and self-organisation. Devaki Jain states

> My constant argument with my sisters in the feminist movement was to say, 'Let us not lament that we are excluded, that theories and propositions do

> not include "us". Let us move to offering well-designed and well-constructed theories which include the knowledge that we have gained through women's studies and working with women (Jain D. , 2018, p. xvi).

In an international conference titled *Transition to Sustainability in the 21st Century,* held in Tokyo, Amartya Sen offered a keynote address titled *The Ends and Means of Sustainability.* Highlighting the redefinition proposed by Devaki Jain, which to this day still suffers from question marks in many parts of the world, Sen asserted

> Women should be seen not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things – both individually and jointly. We also have to go beyond their role specifically as 'consumers' or as 'people with needs', and consider, more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can – given the opportunity – think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and through these means, reshape the world (as cited in Jain, 2018, p. xvi).

The Women's conferences, the first one which was held in Mexico City in 1995, followed by Nairobi and Beijing in 1985 and 1995 respectively were significant to Devaki Jain's feminist formation, according to her own records. These, along with related conferences that were held in India, as well as the preconference activities that involved workshops, consultations, and expert group studies in strategies for data collection and poverty reduction; were to provide

Devaki Jain with the enormous 'ocean of knowledge', – as she terms it, – and contacts that served the basis of information and action for her involvement in the women's movement and feminist engagement. The two principal challenges that Devaki Jain raised were the question of the figures attributed to women's economic contribution in society and to the nation in general; and the perception, objective and design of donor funds from the North to the South, meant to enable women's progress and empowerment in the South.

Devaki Jain states that she perceived deep and inherent misconceptions as well as ignorance amongst Northern donors regarding the ground level conditions of the Southern women who were the receptors of donations.[89] In order to address these misconceptions, she developed diverse strategies, one of which was to set up an organisation of women from the Southern continents that would be capable of articulating the specific development necessities of Southern women and would have the capacity to design and elaborate development structures to meet these specific needs. Devaki Jain based her plan on the premise that such a platform

[89] The 1980 Brandt Report established the terminology of Global North and South in distinguishing between trade and relative wealth of regions; North referring to the wealthy countries of the Northern hemisphere and South to the developing, more impoverished countries of the Southern hemisphere (Brandt & Agency, 1980).
See Also: https://www.sharing.org/information-centre/reports/brandt-report-summary

would benefit both the Northern donors providing support for women's advancement as well as the southern recipients of aid, the "so-called beneficiaries" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xvii).

Through the invitations to various conferences and her participation in events, Devaki Jain was able to study approximately 145 project evaluation reports recording the transfer of funds from the North to the South as means of funding for women's development projects. She reveals that almost all of these projects "had a negative impact on poor women because their roles had not been correctly identified, and thus they lost out" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xvii). In 1984, – previous to sending them a lecture she had written titled *Development as if Women Mattered: Can Women Build a new Paradigm?* – Devaki Jain invited some of the women she had met while travelling and attending events in different countries to a seminar in Bangalore, in a bid to identify alternative approaches to resolving Southern Women's issues; this seminar laid the groundwork to the founding of the *Third World Women's network, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era;* (DAWN).

> We identified the macro situations within which poor women's experience of development needed to be contextualised–the food crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa, the cultural crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, the debt crisis in Latin America and poverty and militarism in the Asia-Pacific region (Jain D. , 2018, p. xviii).

The group met a couple of times more over the next year to design and develop frameworks specifically tailored to the location of poor women's development and to prepare presentations for the UN World Conference on women that was held in 1985. The structures that were presented focused directly on linking both the negative and positive situations of women requiring aid to their particular macro-economic conditions and the political settings of their origins. Thus, the DAWN group emphasised the indispensable requirement that the struggles and contributions of women be envisaged and analysed against their particular and specific backdrops; in order to establish truly effective and progressive strategies as to 'what' and 'how' to organise and promote true development.[90] As such, the DAWN intermediation on women as regards strategies and development "not only transformed the underpinnings of that discourse, but also shifted the creativity, the intellectual leadership, from 'patrons' in the North to 'clients' in the South" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xviii).

Devaki Jain asserts that in the Southern continents, the period of 1975 to 1995 saw a clear focus on development funding and human rights, as key concerns which directly related to the economic and social space of women. She further outlines that by 1995 the concept of feminism began to take hold in the Global South, as a result of the influences of intermingling amongst women from

[90] See: http://dawnnet.org/about/history/

different countries, regions, classes and occupations. However, she highlights that the diffusion and acceptation of the term feminists as a means of identification by Indian women only started in the 1990s and even so, there are many who still shun the term and its connotations as per their perception. A clear example is to be seen in the essay by former editor of the 'feminist' journal *Manushi*, Madhu Kishwar, titled *A Horror of 'Isms': Why I do not call myself a Feminist.*[91]

However, Devaki Jain herself concedes that her close friendship to eminent feminist journalist and political activist Gloria Steinem, the founder of Ms. – a feminist magazine – as well as her own appreciation of the concepts upheld by the term led her to consider herself a feminist in the 1970. This period coincided with women activists and intellectuals around the world beginning to challenge the apparently exclusively Western origins of feminism struggles, while exploring feminist tendencies and expressions salient in other countries. Starting in the 1970s, over the years Devaki Jain has written numerous books, studies, articles, and has contributed to innumerable journals. She has also offered lectures and participated in intellectual meetings, conferences and much more. The questions she raises and explores, including those related to women's invisible contribution to the gross domestic products of their regions; as well as the issues she addressed back in the 1970s, continue to be extremely relevant in today's societies.[92]

[91] See: (Chaudhuri, Feminism in India, 2012)

[92] For texts by Devaki Jain see: http://www.devakijain.com/writing_landing.php

Amongst Devaki Jain's significant contributions, as a feminist economist, was to challenge many of the established concepts of what development actually meant and entailed and the theories around the role of development in poverty reduction. She argues that "'development' […] – one of the legacies of empire – undermined if not destroyed the road to progress for the former colonies" (Jain D. , 2018, p. xix). 'Underdevelopment'– she affirms – is the term used to refer to ex-colonies, which in fact refers to countries whose natural resources, as well as land, water and forests were not being fully exploited. The strategy that was put forward by many economists and followed by governments and market to develop and exploit these unused resources as a way of creating opportunity and employment from increased gross domestic product of these nations has proven to be a failure in altering the poverty levels of the vast majority of the populations of these countries. Rather, as Devaki Jain demonstrates in her analysis, these developmental projects have been the cause of the destruction of many of the natural resources of the nations in question.

Devaki Jain has criticised the failings of economic policies and their implementers that have generally failed to translate into social progress. The *last women* as she calls the excluded women at ground level are suffering the consequences of policies that measured progress through inadequate systems such as GDP.

> Development was being seen as an economic issue and was being designed usually far away from the beneficiaries […] globally accepted ideas on how

> to generate economic prosperity, namely GDP growth, have been responsible for the persistence of poverty and inequality (Jain D. , 2018, pp. xix-xx).

She has argued and demonstrated that the current measure of 'progress' almost exclusively in terms of capital and profits has been and continues to be extremely detrimental for the masses. Through her analysis and in many cases direct involvement with different organisations, Devaki Jain has also highlighted the ongoing wage imbalances and faults within many Indian government programmes that fail to provide women enabling infrastructures, despite the fact of as much as 40 percent of women participation in these programmes. She asserts that

> Any programme – micro or macro, national or international – addressed to the poor needs to be looked at through a gender lens, since not only are women the poorest amongst the poor, they are also the main breadwinners in poor households, the ones who could sacrifice anything in order to bring bread to their families (Jain D. , 2018, p. xxii).

Devaki Jain went on numerous tours and lectures around the world aiming to promote and encourage South to South engagement, cooperation and interaction as a means through which to readdress the concepts and contents of development and economics. She considered that there was the need for the South to assert its

own status and perspective and challenge the financial and scholarly pressure and hegemony of the North. Her actions included speaking engagements such as at the Asian Development Bank in Manila and the World Women's Congress in Uganda.

Within these priorities she also sought to draw attention to the need to understand the issue of poverty as experienced by women, but without the act of viewing them as receptors of aid, but as agents of change; inspired and drawing on the perspective highlighted by Amartya Sen, as quoted previously in this chapter. Thus, Devaki Jain sustains that there is something deeply amiss with prevailing notions of enabling of the poor out of poverty through plans and ideas constructed by those offering aid without the practical and intellectual involvement especially of the women receptors of the projects.

Another neglected issue that Devaki Jain has highlighted in her work is in the valuing of work traditionally carried out by women, that is, the value of women's work using time as a measure. In 1982 the *Institute of Social Studies Trust* (ISST) in Bangalore carried out a pioneering study – one of the earliest studies of its kind in developing countries – aimed at rectifying the national statistics figures regarding work participation. Devaki Jain argues that the traditional method of counting worker participation was erroneous and did not include the real figures of women's economic contribution. The study which was carried out in selected number of households in Rajasthan and West Bengal involved the ongoing presence of researchers who recorded the activities that

women carried out for 16 hours a day during a period of one week. Devaki Jain asserts, that the

> study provided many insights, especially into the fact that when you measure work according to the time spent, you not only capture what are called 'economically valuable' issues but also the time that women spent serving a household – fetching water, cooking, cleaning and looking after children (Jain D. , 2018, p. 55).

In 1990 the *United Nations Development Programme* (UNDP) initiated the *Human Development Reports* (HDRs) with a specific focus on gender discrimination. The 1990 report, as Devaki Jain asserts "offers a very special illumination, an enlargement of the issue of inequality through a gender lens" (Jain D. , 2018, p. 56). The report made a clear case for the fact that male and female inequality was not restricted to specific geographies, classes, religions or states of development, but was in fact world-wide and "cut across all the usual divides – advanced, industrialised countries (G7), developing countries (G77), class religion, race, geography" (Jain D. , 2018, p. 56).

The fourth chapter of the HDR report in particular was especially relevant. It raised issues that have been central focus points of feminist, activist and academic attention, since the first UN conference in Mexico in 1975, through to the third conference in Nairobi in 1985. These are issues that continue to have significant relevance right up until the present day. Amongst these is the fact that

women's work continues to remain economically undervalued as much of what women do does not fall into the limited definitions of what is understood as economic activity. In terms of economic value which is limited to market value, household domestic activities, child care as well as work in the community remain mostly unrecognised and undervalued.

As such, the report highlights that "The total product of society is thus underestimated – and the economic contributions of many people, especially women, are unrecognised and unrewarded. […] unpaid work goes far beyond housekeeping, and its omission leaves a major gap in national income accounting" (as cited in Jain D., 2018, p. 57). Here Devaki Jain further points out that the value of community and household commitments to which women apply themselves generally transcend market value with their innate, humanist value; this has been largely ignored as far as monetization is concerned.

The HDR report made a very strong case for the monetisation of these activities that are traditionally considered as non-market. It made a point of the obligation to recognise and reward in monetary terms the burden of work that women take up while emphasizing that lack of economic valuation of women's domestic work not only underestimates and undervalues or devalues their contribution, it effectively reduces women to an insignificant place in societies where status is often directly related to income-earning capacity. It also highlighted the fact that man of the income generating jobs or paid work that men

did was in fact a result of the partnership, or is a *joint production* which would not exist without women's collaboration at home.

"If women's unpaid work were properly valued, it is quite possible that women would emerge in most societies as the main breadwinners – or at least equal bread winners – since they put in more hours of work than men" (as cited in Jain D., 2018, p. 59). The report ends suggesting that each family member must partake in the income generated by market work in direct proportion to his or her total labour contributions which would include what is unpaid labour. It states, "For households to share income with their wives will become an act of entitlement rather than benevolence" (as cited in Jain D., 2018, p. 59).

Over the years much of Devaki Jain's writings and lectures of participation in studies and research projects through diverse organisations have consistently focused on women and their work. The results she presents consistently underpin the interconnections between the condition of women, their labour, poverty and inequality. The underestimation of work participation of women, especially amongst the poor due to patriarchal bias, faulty research methodology and data input is amply recorded in her writings. She cites studies and data that evidence that women's participation in work not only often surpasses that of men, but that girls between the ages of 8 and 12 are often engaged in economic activities.

It turns out that what is termed as *domestic activity* and understood as being exclusively *housework*, in actual fact accounts for a mere fraction of the time employed in labour by women. House work within this misconception also

includes weeding, milking and attending to farm animals for six hours or more, or 12 hours or more per day dedicated to other related chores. As she asserts of one of the studies carried out by ISST,

> The study did not just call attention to the invisibilising [sic] of women's work, but sought to devise research methods which did justice to this work. […] among the poorest (usually landless) households women's work participation rates were higher than those of men […] 'all poor women are women workers.' No poor woman can afford not to work, as she and her family would perish. Women were responsible for the household's survival and would do anything, including selling their bodies, to bring home that daily bread (Jain D. , 2018, p. 202).

Devaki Jain has spent over two decades promoting the necessity to design and recreate current models of macro-economic systems and theories of growth in order to successfully eradicate poverty and gender inequality. She has continuously argued that methods of poverty eradication alongside the theories of growth and economy that have been applied to date are inherently flawed and as such, the objective of achieving gender equality from a flawed system was not only misleading but in fact unethical. She has also presented consistent evidence of the connection between poverty, overall inequality and gender inequality, as factors that are "inextricably linked" (Jain D. , 2018, p. 238).

Devaki Jain stands out as one of India's most visionary feminist economist and thinker. She has without a question spent a lifetime working with women while also presenting lucid arguments that evidence the urgent requirement of new policies of macro-economy that need to be ingrained in future institutional plans and policies. These would need to provide fresh positions on growth as a means of poverty reduction and new indices with which to measure growth and poverty. She argues that this is the only way forward towards the design of development that can successfully alleviated and effectively reduce current figures of growing inequality, especially in India.

(2.3.1) FIGURE - 47 A, B & C

A – Devaki Jain, (2018). *The Journey of a Southern Feminist*, Sage Publications. Retrieved from: https://www.amazon.com/Journey-Southern-Feminist-Devaki-Jain/dp/9352806212

B – Devaki Jain, (2018). *Close Encounters of Another Kind: Women and Development Economics*, Sage Publications.
Retrieved from: https://www.amazon.de/Close-Encounters-Another-Kind-Development/dp/9352807715

C – Devaki Jain (2018). Development Seminar - *Feminist Engagement with Post-Colonial Developments*; (28 September, 2018) at Brookings Institution, New Delhi, India. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/events/development-seminar-feminist-engagement-with-post-colonial-developments/

PART 3 STUDIES IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

> Art is not selfish and does not exist for its own purpose. Therefore art – in the broadest sense of the word – can also speak for human freedom, can raise to issue the senselessness of violence.
>
> Art is able to unmask it as an essentially negative force, one that solves nothing and in the end only serves to destroy man and his culture.
>
> Jaap Bremer, 1995, Violence to Non-Violence;
>
> (as cited in Kelly, 2000, p. 109).

3.1 –REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AS NATIONAL ICONS, THE BEGINNINGS OF RECOGNITION, FEMINIST INTENT AND THE MODERN ARTIST

In her ground breaking article, *When Was Modernism*, Geeta Kapur stated that "Modernization in India is a real if incomplete historical process" (Kapur, 1995, p. 106). Originally researched and written in 1995, many of the situations that are touched upon in this article still ring true in India today. Kapur asserts that after independence the new Indian National state made great effort to

establish an extensive public sector; a well-planned and thought out economy that that would ensure balanced industrial growth. However, the process of industrialization was never completed and is still largely work in progress in what continues to be a mainly agricultural economy.

Partha Mitter situates the first phase of modernism in India as an "artistic expression of resistance to colonial rule" (Mitter, 2007, p. 10), which ended approximately in 1947, with independence. According to Mitter, the Modernists held rural India in high esteem as representing the authentic nation where their so called artistic primitivism was, in fact, an antithesis to colonial urban values. In accordance with this,

> […] For artists Sunayani Devi and Amrita Sher-Gil, village India became a surrogate for their own predicament as women within the wider nationalist struggle. In parallel with the primitivists, artists belonging to a 'naturalist' counter-stream, engaged with quotidian life, some of them expressing deep sympathies for the underclass (Mitter, 2007, p. 11).

Partha Mitter documents an exhibition in Calcutta, arranged by the British Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, in March 1873. Mitter asserts that the *Indian Charivari*, a comic book that covered the exhibition wrote "[…]. The most remarkable feature of the show was the presence of twenty-five women artists, most of them Bengali and married" (Mitter, 1994, p. 75). The presence of women painting in the privacy of their homes was the norm in those days, while their

male relatives studied in the art academies that were set up by the British in Calcutta, Madras (Chennai) and Bombay (Mumbai). Milford-Lutzker identifies the above statement in the Charivari as the first acknowledgement of art produced by women in a public exhibition (Milford-Lutzker, 1997). Gayatri Sinha states that unlike in the west, there is little or no documentation of a tradition of women artists in India before the twentieth century. There is what Sinha terms as a "shadowy knowledge" (Sinha, et al., 1996, p. 9), of the presence of women painters during the Mughal period, but no record of names, faces or histories. Sinha also points out that the restrictive public lives of women and the patriarchal attitudes of the nineteenth century allowed for little documentation of the work of women artists while making their intent at creating art a distinctly uphill task.

The turn of the century in India brought with it "a strong emotional/moral rhetoric" (Sinha, et al., 1996, p. 12). As cited earlier in this study, the new national idol had a specific role for Indian women. This was perpetuated through theatre, film and western academic painting traditions that were offered in the schools that had been established during the colonial rule. See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21, (1.2.4) FIGURE - 22, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 37, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 38, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 39, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 40 and (2.2.3) FIGURE - 41.

Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), a partially self-trained painter and amongst the first to take up the European classical painting style was awarded prizes for 'correctly' representing in his paintings upper cast ladies wearing the acceptable facial expressions while also demonstrating the appropriate social demeanour and

moral standards expected of the good Hindu woman. He was to become the father of calendar art in India. The images of women that Varma painted alongside his contemporaries of the time were to inform all future popular visual culture narrative, as regards accepted standards of beauty, expressions and behaviour amongst morally sound women. See: (3.1) FIGURE - 48 A, B & C

To quote Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “the disjunction with 'tradition' and the encounter with 'modernity' assumed a sharp edge in all cultural representations, and the precursors of modern 'bazaar' images emerged as a dominant and standardised mass-art form” (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 91). These standards continue to dictate popular culture today, as seen in the representation of women and goddesses on the numerous film billboards scattered around Indian cities, towns and villages. The same is true for the way women are represented in popular television soap operas, Bollywood films on calendars as well as in the graphic novels like *Amar Chitra Katha*; which presume to provide educational stories of religious history and mythology for Indian children and youngsters, as much as in India as around the world.

This narrow prism of correct womanhood continues to be propagated through digital devices, as can be seen from the numerous videos and other media circulating online worldwide. Guha-Thakurta and Sinha both assert that after perfecting the Western academic techniques of oil and portraiture painting, Raja Varma Ravi appointed himself with the task of creating nationalist images that

(3.1) FIGURE - 48 A, B & C

A – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). *Maharani Chimanbai of Baroda*. [Oil painting]. Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/chimanbai-by-raja-ravi-varma/

B – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d). *Late nineteenth century, portrait of a lady*. [Oil on canvas]. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India.
Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/portrait-of-a-lady-by-raja-ravi-varma/

C – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). *Younger Maharani Chimanbai of Baroda*. [Oil painting]. Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/maharani-chimanbai-by-raja-ravi-varma/

would speak and contribute to upholding the image of an amazing and glorious past for India. In order to create this national and cultural stereotype, Ravi accorded the portrayal of his vision of the perfect feminine attitude and sensibility as foremost to the creation of national stereotype. "Through his choice of genres, his career also signified the articulation of a conscious 'Indian' identity in

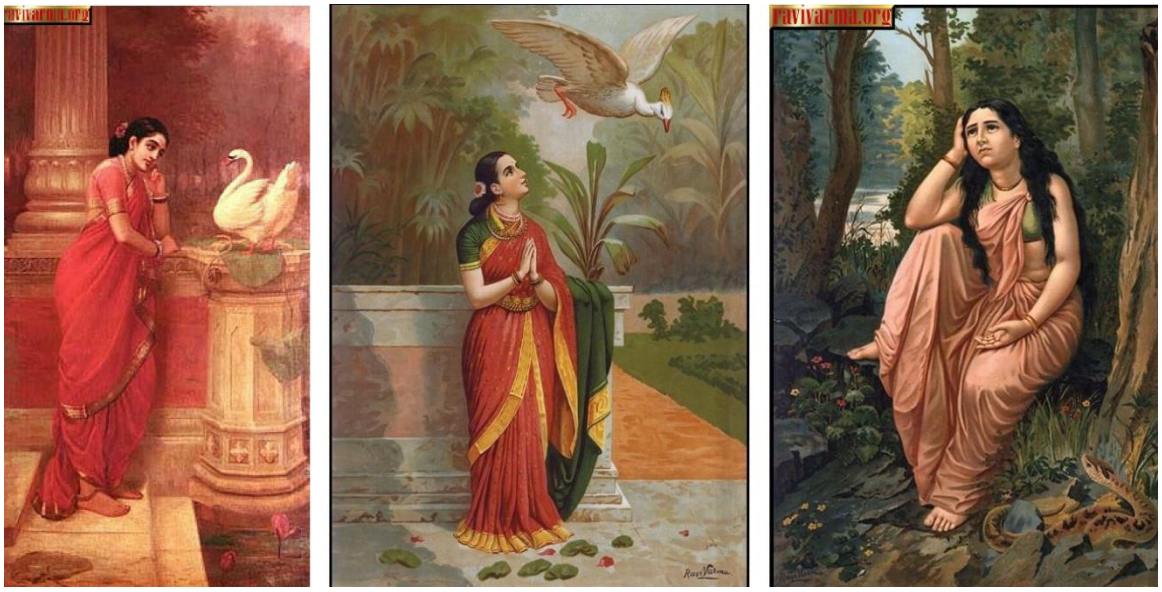
painting, within a changed and modernised stylistic context" (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 93).

Raja Ravi Varma tapped into his traditional education in classical Sanskrit, *Malayalam* and *Kathakali* literature alongside the training and influence of British portraiture and European neo-classical paintings to create

> […] a fertile meeting ground of the 'traditional' and the 'modern' in art, precipitating the redefinition of each. […] he represented a conscious artistic and nationalist project of tapping Indian literary and mythic themes and refashioning their representation in the creation of a new Indian 'high art' form. It was a project which perfectly dovetailed with the Orientalist and nationalist invocations of India's 'classical' past and definitions of national identity in terms of that past (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 93). See: (3.1) FIGURE - 49 A, B & C

Ravi Varma continued his oeuvre, placing his portraits in everyday domestic locations incorporating genre and mythological elements in his paintings. He thus successfully created a new national iconography, centred on these sanitised feminine images. Guha-Thakurta points out that these images of women painted by Ravi Varma became the principle position upon which the artist as well as his critics and curators reconstructed and negotiated a new national character and identity, based on concepts of purity, tradition, mythology and

sacredness. Particularly enamoured by the neo-classical paintings of two French Academy artists of his time, Boulanger and Bouguereau. Ravi Varma drew heavily



(3.1) FIGURE - 49 A, B & C

A – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). *Swan telling Damayanti about Nalan's virtues.* Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/damayanthi-talking-with-swan-about-nalan-by-raja-ravi-varma/

B –Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). *Haunsa Damayanti Sanwada (Talk with Swan and Damayanti*) (Oleograph print).
Retrieved from:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_Ravi_Varma,_Haunsa_Damayanti_Sanwada_(Oleograph_print).jpg

C – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). *Damayanti Vanavasa (Damayanti in the forest).* Chrome lithograph.
Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/damayanti-vanavasa-by-raja-ravi-varma/

on their pantheon of nude Venuses and Psyches and their allegorical images of Chastity or Charity. Garbed in elaborate Indian costumes, and

> placed within a mythic narrative as *Shakuntala, Damayanti* or *Draupadi*, these images, with the same coy expressions and guileful mannerisms, were transformed into the much-admired 'devis' of Hindu legends (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 94). See: (3.1) FIGURE - 50 A, B, C & D

(3.1) FIGURE - 50 A, B, C & D

A – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.) *Arjuna and Subhadra*.
Retrieved from: https://www.liveinternet.ru/users/irena_69/post158789921

B – Raja Ravi Varma (n.d.) *Damayanti: scenes from the Mahabharata*.
Retrieved from: https://www.liveinternet.ru/users/irena_69/post158789921

C – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). *Nala leaving Damayanti*. Oil painting.
Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/nala-leaving-damayanti-by-raja-ravi-varma/

D – Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.) *Radha Madhavam* (*Lord Madhav with Radha).*
Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum, Lakshmi Vilas Palace, Vadodara, Gujarat.
Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/radha-madhavam-by-raja-ravi-varma/

Raja Ravi Varma was able to construct in his work the above nationalistic iconography of womanhood by representing the women in his paintings using images that were western and life-like in conception and appearance while at the same time meaningful as cultural and mythical symbols of India. In effect, Varma was to create what became a new cultural iconography of womanhood which involved reconstructed codes and parameters of dress, virtuousness and body language; thus creating a new aesthetic ideal of perfect Indian womanhood. As a part of this process of reconstruction, his feminine figures – as well as masculine – are mostly dressed in opulent jewelled robes, covered in gold ornaments.

The symbology involved bestows upon them obvious and desirable wealth and status, to which the viewers almost instantly connected. Additionally, by placing his compositions in splendid surroundings, lifted from the mythological scripts and stories of the classical Indian epics, Ravi Varma convinced his viewers of the desirability of these new models of women and the associated acquired status. See: (3.1) FIGURE - 48 A, B & C; (3.1) FIGURE - 49 A, B & C;(3.1) FIGURE - 50 A, B, C & D; (3.1) FIGURE - 51, (3.1) FIGURE - 52 and (3.1) FIGURE - 53.

(3.1) FIGURE - 51

Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). [Paintings and lithographs]. Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/portrait-paintings-by-raja-ravi-varma/

This type of publicity message is not far from what continues to be the norm in current television and magazine advertising trends, both in India and the West.

> A similar metamorphosis occurs in Ravi Varma's images of Kalidasa's love-lorn heroine, Shakuntala, as she appears as a voluptuous [sic] flesh-and-blood woman, wrapped in romantic dreams or glancing back at her lover, Dushyanta under the pretext of picking a thorn from her feet. In the latter in- stance, this very gesture-the twist and turn of head and body-draws the viewer into the narrative, inviting one to place this scene within an imagined sequence of images and events. On its own, the painting stands like a frozen tableau (like a still from a moving film), plucked out of an on-running spectacle of episodes. These paintings also reflect the centrality of

the 'male gaze' in defining the feminine image. Though absent from the pictorial frame, the male lover forms a pivotal point of reference; his gaze transfixes Shakuntala, as also Damayanti, into 'desired' images, casting them as lyrical and sensual ideals (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 94). See: (3.1) FIGURE - 52 and (3.1) FIGURE - 53.

(3.1) FIGURE - 52

Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). [Paintings and lithographs]. Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/portrait-paintings-by-raja-ravi-varma/

In the late nineteenth century, Ravi Varma established his own printing press. Guha-Thakurta asserts that the endeavour was from its initiation fed by nationalistic sentiments. As a famous painter with a very well established and favourable reputation, both amongst the Indian elite and the British raj, Varma had no difficulty in acquiring patronage and support for his venture. He was very soon receiving patronage from Nationalist leaders in Mumbai and Calcutta. He went on to create a large set of paintings purely for the purpose of reproduction in the printing press. Ravi Varma's initial aim for reproducing his work in mass production format was supposedly to reach a European viewership, through oleograph prints. This was seen as a way of extending his fame as well as feeding the Indian nationalistic cause.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta states that "Ravi Varma, too […], apparently wished to 'improve popular tastes by providing an alternative to the existing range of 'atrocious' engravings of Hindu gods and goddesses on the market" (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 95). However, the mere process of mass production of his work, alongside his patriotic aspirations of 'improving' the general public's taste, inevitably resulted in a loss of quality, simplification and repetition of form that can only be considered as part and parcel of mass produced art forms. Soon the elaborate costumes and surroundings that were characteristic of his paintings became simpler and simpler, located within set backgrounds, often filled in by his assistants.

Within this simplification, representations of women suffered their own particular degradation. They were all modelled with the same childlike naïve facial expressions, wide-eyed coy mannerisms and body postures. As stated earlier, Ravi Varma's oleographic printouts set the precedent and shaped what continues, in many ways, to be today's calendar art trade in India. These calendar images to be found all over India contributed to the feminine stereotype that continues to be fed to the masses in India.

After Raja Ravi Varma, new artists such as Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), were to initiate an alternative 'national art', by displacing Ravi Varma's work as Kitsch; however, the use of the female figure in the fabrication of religious and mythological icons with heavy socio cultural ideals remained in full flow.

(3.1) FIGURE - 53

Raja Ravi Varma (n.d.). [Paintings and lithographs]. Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/portrait-paintings-by-raja-ravi-varma/

The new female form was modernised but the concepts of ideal womanhood remained anchored in tradition as outlined in Hindu mythology, Sanskrit literature alongside the supposedly appropriate Hindu values and ethics (Guha-Thakurta, 1991). Alongside these traditional concepts of ideal womanhood, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was accompanied by nationalistic discourse that connected tradition, femininity, nation and the mother-goddess in powerful

bonds against colonialism. Within the nationalistic project, as already seen and analysed earlier, women were the preservers and guardians of traditional customs and rituals that translated into representations of a virtuous and golden nation, capable of independence, stability and growth.

In fighting the onslaught of colonialism, women were designated their special roles in the nationalist project-as preservers of age-old customs and rituals, as embodiments of religiosity and virtue, as upholders of domestic order and stability, as nurturing mothers, faithful wives and devoted daughters, all sustaining the male in his public services to the motherland. They were also deified, in literature and nationalist writing, as the inspirational figure of Bharat-Mata, rousing her 'sons' to patriotic action. (Guha-Thakurta, 1991, p. 96). See: (1.2.4) FIGURE - 21, (1.2.4) FIGURE - 22 and (2.2.3) FIGURE - 37, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 38, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 39, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 40, (2.2.3) FIGURE - 41 and (3.1) FIGURE - 53.

(3.1) FIGURE - 54

Raja Ravi Varma, (n.d.). [Paintings and lithographs]. Retrieved from: https://ravivarma.org/portrait-paintings-by-raja-ravi-varma/

3.1.1 GEETA KAPUR (1943)

Geeta Kapur the renowned Delhi based scholar critic and curator of Indian art and cultural practice is unquestionably India's leading art theorist, critic and curator. Her essays have been widely published and include books as well as articles. She has not only documented the modern Indian art scene and practice from its beginnings, but has shaped the development of modern Indian art and the contemporary art scene since the 1970s. She is without a doubt one of the main pioneers in the critical construction of post-colonial theory of art practice in India and has dominated the field of Indian art theory since the mid-seventies.

She is co-founder and editor of one of the most important Indian cultural anthologies, *Journal of Art and Ideas* and was also an advisory member of the leading international journal *Third Text* and Indian publishers, *Marg*, which also counts amongst its founding editors the humanist writer Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and cultural historian and intellectual, Jyotindra Jain (1943). Geeta Kapur's father, M. N. Kapur was a school principal and she is married to installation artist, Vivan Sundaram (1943), who also happens to be Amrita Sher-Gil's nephew. She grew up in New Delhi, and obtained a Masters in Fine Arts from New York University in 1964. It was a period marked by student movements and others like the *Beat Generation* were increasingly present in Europe and the USA.

Geeta Kapur returned to India, but in 1968 went to London to study at the Royal College of Art (RCA) with the Marxist artist and art historian Peter De Francia, (Shivadas, 2009). The writer and curator Vidya Shivadas qualifies Geeta Kapur as an interventionist art critic and curator who "in her 45-year-long career has developed, almost singlehandedly, the critical voice and staked a successful claim for its autonomy" (Shivadas, 2009, p. part 8; para. 3). Amit Parameswaran and Rahul Dev – scholars and curators of Jawaharlal Nehru University, – affirm that Geeta Kapur has "engaged in and theorized cultural movements and collectives that posit resistance and change vis-à-vis imperialism and communalism" (Parameswaran, Dev, & Kapur, 2015, p. para. 5). Parameswaran and Dev also clarify that the institutional building of art history, cultural, film and performance studies in India is a relatively recent development and is still ongoing; within this process, Geeta Kapur navigated limitations and demonstrated interconnections that provided the theoretical writings and platform for critical enquires such as those published in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (JAI).

Geeta Kapur's thesis for the RCA titled *In Quest of Identity* was a study of indigenous presence in post-colonial cultures, specifically in the context of modern /contemporary Indian painting (Kapur, 1989). Vidya Shivadas asserts that *In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-colonial Culture* is "one of the first attempts at theorizing the location and practice of post-colonial artists within the framework of nation and identity, and the very early use of the word 'post-colonial' in the Indian context" (Shivadas, 2009, p. part 8; para. 6).

The shortage of academic and theoretical material in the Indian context led Geeta Kapur to look at and examine Latin American postcolonial discourse. Placing specific emphasis on the theories and writings of Octavio Paz, she developed her discourse and arguments based on Mexican art of the nineteen twenties. Vidya Shivadas highlights that Kapur's text which

> was serialized in the artist magazine *Vrishchik*, […] challenged the authority of so-called international art which was the, 'only relevant point of view for those of us who are not an organic part of western culture but bound to it by historical contingency' (Kapur, as cited in Shivadas, 2009, part 8, para. 8); (Shivadas, 2009, p. part 8; para. 6).

Unquestionably significant to this study, I choose to include some of the questions and points raised by Geeta Kapur in her RCA thesis as well as an appraisal of her overall contribution; as one of the most important scholars of Indian art and someone who has played a pivotal role in the discourse and in the shaping and construction of modern and contemporary Indian art, and scholarship. Kapur's thesis, *In Quest of Identity,* explored for the first time in the context of Indian art and artists, the influence of the artist's own national culture, history and traditions on their art practice, in the face of the erasure and distortion by the experience of colonization of not only identity, but also cultural and historic traditions and features. Geeta Kapur asserts that the loss of identity suffered as a

result of colonialism becomes a challenge to be dealt with in the post-colonial period, consciously or unconsciously, where

> The intelligentsia in particular sees itself faced with the challenge of building a contemporary society without the readymade 'values' of the foreign system, and […]. It is then that the fundamental search begins, to define a cultural identity in relationship to the past and the aspirations for the future and in that process to discover a contemporary uniqueness in a world in which these people have clearly been 'left behind' (Kapur, 2014, p. 5).

Kapur thus highlighted the urgent need to re-evaluate history and tradition, a task for the intelligentsia in order to develop an authentic contemporary culture. Geeta Kapur's thesis draws attention to the problematic quest that post-colonial nations battle with; to define identities, values and direction as per their own traditions and future aspirations, while adapting to their "dislocated cultures" (Kapur, 2014, p. 7). She states that the struggle for independence initially awakened these questions of identity that had been previously suppressed by colonialism and the process of post-independence reconstruction gave rise to more complex issues that had been kept artificially dormant by the united struggle against the foreign governance. Kapur uses the term *indigenism* to define the post-independence preoccupation by the intelligentsia to shape a contemporary culture that took into consideration the history, traditions, and environment, that is

the "surviving culture of the people" (Kapur, 2014, p. 7); in the midst of the increasingly destructive chaos that took over, following independence.

Geeta Kapur asserted that this Indigenism was an obligatory position that had to be adapted by all colonial people as a means with which to reclaim their liberty and dignity as well as providing a tool with which to reappraise "the morass of values that survive colonialism, by an understanding of history and tradition in terms of contemporary needs. […] it is a means of establishing a creative relationship with one's natural and cultural environment" (Kapur, 2014, p. 7). Geeta Kapur began what today has become an immense body scholarship contribution with Indian painting post-independence; that is from 1947 onwards. Those initial studies bore evidence to the birth and growth of a new contemporary culture based on newly found self-confidence and cultural identity, while also struggling with a search for complete independence from colonial culture. Evidently, the quest for absolute cultural independence was not always wholly achieved. Kapur stated at the time, "independence is a relevant historical fact particularly in the discussion of cultural issues" (Kapur, 2014, p. 36).

Kapur attests to the fact that prior to independence, in the first half of the twentieth century there was a lack of continuous or true body of *Indian* painting. In this case Kapur refers specifically to the type of painting considered modern or contemporary by the academy, and not to the traditional arts categorised as folk and vernacular. In referring to the artistic creation of this period from the 1900 to 1947, which she denominates as the "Struggle for Indianness" (Kapur, 2014, p.

36); she states that the period is marked by "a series of painfully self-conscious starts; each painter and movement regards itself as a pioneer in creating an art style that is modern and Indian but all of them are unable to go beyond grafting subjects and styles" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 36-37).

Geeta Kapur's analysis also highlighted the changing attitudes of the British in India. She marks the period of 1857, following the *Indian Mutiny* or *Great Rebellion*, considered by many scholars also to be the *First War of Independence*, as the turning point in the attitude of the British towards India. According to Kapur, this period was marked by "a policy of cultural entrenchment, most effectively carried out by a shrewd educational policy" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 36-37). Kapur confirms that in accordance with Thomas Babington Macaulay's[93] memorandum on education for Indians – which also in

[93] Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was a British politician and historian, well known for his role in developing a system of indigenous cultural genocide that is now known as *Macaulayism*. He was amongst the most significant figures in the introduction of English and Western concepts to Indian education and the replacement of Persian by English as the official national language and in schools, through the training of Indians who spoke English as teachers. This led to what is now known as *Macaulayism*, which in the case of India promoted some systematic elimination of the traditional and ancient systems of Indian education and scientific knowledge. However, on hindsight, Macaulay's policies and contribution would also prove to offer positive effects on Indian

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some way reflected the continued derision of many of the British towards most aspects of Indian culture, – this period marked the beginning of a constructive change where "privileged Indians were given English education, to cultivate them as: 'Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect'" (Thomas Babington Macaulay, as cited in Kapur, 2014, pp. 36-37). The result of this new policy of education was a large new middleclass population that filled the clerical post jobs and some professional posts for the English. It was amongst this newly English educated population that the socially and politically progressive nationalists were born. Kapur however asserts that the rebellious and progressive were a small select group while "the large majority remained conservative and loyal to the end, and slavishly imitated their masters" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 36-37).

Meanwhile, although Indian culture was generally viewed with disdain, a wholesome attempt was made to conserve and adapt the immensely well-known traditional arts and crafts of India to serve the English taste. Between 1850 and 1875 several art schools modelled upon the English system were established in Madras, Bombay and Lahore. These offered a wide variety of subjects in applied arts in an attempt to revive and shape Indian traditional art and crafts for English taste. Geeta Kapur mercilessly condemns these initial endeavours, asserting that

society, probably also laying the foundation for the first social reformers (Kampfner, 2013).

unsurprisingly, the results "were dismal. It was not possible to revive crafts that were at the same time being systematically destroyed by industrial competition from foreign goods. The training in painting and drawing, given by third rate masters produced abject works" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 36-37). The new Indian middle classes wholly adapted Victorian tastes which were reflected in the towns, cities and their homes.

Geeta Kapur highlights the case of the artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) whose work with its English academic painting style has been studied earlier in this chapter as, an example of the condition of Indian sensibility at the end of the 19th century. Confirming the analysis of Varma's art production earlier in this study, Kapur points out, Raja Ravi Varma started out with

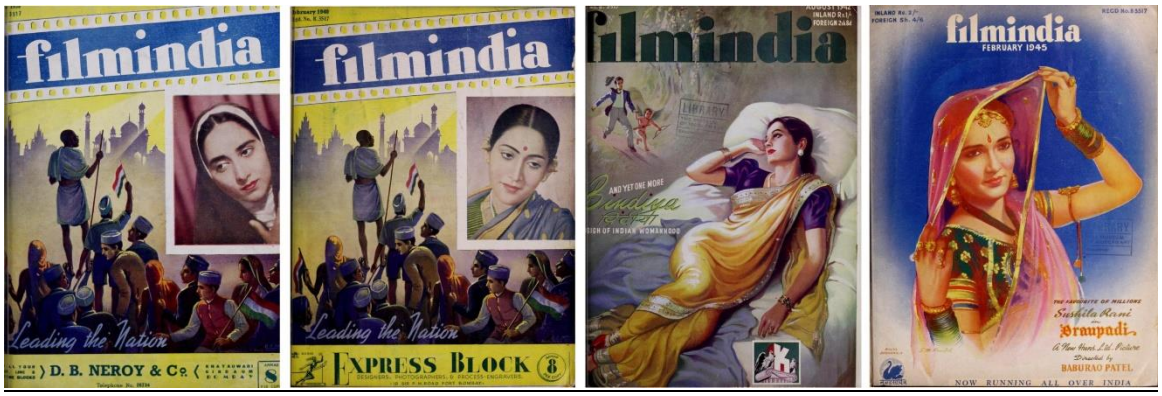
> […] painting portraits but his fame rests on his mythological paintings, in which a predictable synthesis of disparate cultural elements took place. The epic characters seemed like Indian middle class actors, dressed and situated in theatrical decors. They were painted in oils, with the learnt virtues of shading, perspective etc. The popularity he attained was overwhelming. To meet the demand from Maharajas, British residents and the Indian middle class, particularly the latter, he later began to get his work oleographed in a mass scale. Ravi Verma is a progenitor of today's universally popular calender [sic] and poster art, depicting gods and goddesses (leaders and film stars) and in that sense his kind of work is most widely 'consumed' in

India (Kapur, 2014, pp. 36-37). See: (3.1.1) FIGURE - 55 and (3.1.1) FIGURE - 57.

Raja Ravi Varma's influence was countered in intellectual circles towards the late 19th century with the birth of the Indian culture renaissance movement led by the Tagore family, and also, in the context of increasing nationalist fervour. Both of these issues have also been examined in this study.

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 55

Typical calendar art of nationwide popular consumption, based on Varma's oleograph style.
Retrieved from:
https://chitravali.com/index.php?route=product/category&path=60_81
https://divyamarathi.bhaskar.com/amp/news/REL-DHA-vishwamitra-and-menka-story-in-marathi-5367368-PHO.html



(3.1.1) FIGURE - 56 A, B, C & D

A & B – Film posters based on Raja Ravi Varma's art style; from December 1939 and February 1940. These billboards clearly depict the nationalist message of Indian womanhood. Gandhi and his followers can be seen in the background against a backdrop of Indian architecture, brandishing the pre independence Indian flag.

C & D – Film posters of popular productions from August 1942 and February 1945 continue to construct the figure of the new ideal of Indian womanhood. Fair skinned – as such fulfilling the restricted and limited Indian beauty canons – she is pure, dutiful and sacrificial. The slogan in white capital letters and film title on the left of the lying female figure state: *BINDIYA– and yet one more sigh of Indian womanhood.* Bindiya is an Indian female name that alludes to the central location or place where one's domestic affection, pride and loyalty abound; in this case, the nation and homeland as much as in the family home. These posters have been modernised in current Bollywood productions, however the underlying subtext continues to hover around these very ideologies.
Retrieved from: https://www.moviemags.com/index.php

Geeta Kapur highlights that between the 1900 and 1920, there was a tremendous amount of literature and discourse produced regarding the richness of the traditions of Indian art which had been previously scorned and dismissed. Kapur further asserts that the most important scholar who was involved in

bringing about this new recognition of Indian heritage was Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947).

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 57

The popular goddesses *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi* and *Kali* represented in calendar art which is widely consumed all over India.
Retrieved from: http://www.yogalifestyle.com/PONRIndianPosters.htm

At this stage, artists strived to develop what would be a contemporary style influenced by sentiments of nationalism and its struggle while also reviving 'the golden age' of Indian art and its mystic beauty using sources such as Buddhist art and Mughal miniatures that were "suffused with a highly cultivated and delicate emotion" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 38-39). However, Geeta Kapur criticises these early attempts stating that these artistic expressions which took the form of "mythological characters, idyllic lovers and peasants" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 38-39) failed to capture the essential spirit of the Indian sources, instead the supposed

Oriental style and spirit that they attempted to recreate was a "mere excuse for sentimentality" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 38-39).

Kapur also highlights in her analysis that the Bengal School, which was by many considered to be the artistic movement that developed parallel to the *Swadeshi* (self –rule) movement, was in fact completely disconnected from the nation building events and was much more of an artistic movement that sought to escape from the increasingly troublesome changes that were taking place at the time. At this time Rabindranath Tagore, the poet artist, was also unconvinced by the revivalist work being produced, including that by his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore; however, he set up the famous *Visva-Bharati* University in Shantiniketan, where many of the artists were admitted. Although by the late 1920s the movement became the source of much criticism, Kapur states that the artists and their descendants using this traditional sentimental style abounded for numerous years.

Geeta Kapur has highlighted Amrita Sher-Gil as perhaps the first artist who was able to take from the miniature traditions of Indian art and the Ajanta frescos while at the same time eventually managing to successfully cast off the sentimentality of her subjects through simplification and stylisation of her figures "so that they could contain the feeling, without as it were, speaking them out loud" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 38-39). As such, Kapur states that

> Amrita's significance in Indian painting lies in introducing an interpretative dimension to her characters, in realising their poignant and real life-quality.

> And in revaluating the role of *stylisation* within the context of Indian art, making it vital and full-bodied, against the brittle attenuations of the Bengal school and the decorativeness, (Kapur, 2014, pp. 38-39).

The progressive painters, who appeared towards the end of the 1940s, were to look at contemporary and modern Western influences for their inspiration. Several artists groups sprung up, amongst them the *Calcutta group*; in the early 1940s and other groups mostly in Delhi. In 1948 a new formation called *The Bombay Progressive Artists Group* began working with newly qualified artists, receiving patronage and guidance from Europe, especially from Austrian and German war-time immigrants. Geeta Kapur asserts that the Bombay Group ended up leading in the 1950s, with many of the artists leaving Indian and settling in Europe; however they maintained a powerful hold on the Indian art scene through regular visits and exhibitions in India. These artists considered themselves the "avant-garde; a breakaway group, rejecting the immediate past of Indian painting" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 40-41).

Kapur also states that although these artists recognised the contribution of Amrita Sher-Gil, for example, they rejected the value of Indian painting that had been produced at the beginning of the century as merely "cultural revivalism and cultural synthesism" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 40-41). These artists sought to replace the hitherto nationalistic Indianism artistic practice for creative freedom and modernism at an international level. By the end of the 1950s an active artistic

scene in India influenced by the West as well as other regions led to the production of a significant amount of work. However, Geeta Kapur considers that except perhaps in the case of Satish Gujral, the choices of subject matter and influences by the artists of the fifties in their quest for liberation were in no small way short-sighted. She criticises the fact that the rejection of any kind of social and national ideologies meant that these artists' work was completely disconnected with the social and political realities of India at the time.

> […] it is remarkable how aloof their work is form the newly gained Independence, the break-out of the Partition riots. […] On the other hand the premises of modern Western art were entirely accepted, and it was not always realised that concomitant to any language there is imported a value system as well (Kapur, 2014, pp. 42-43).

It would appear that by the 1960s this trend once again takes a u turn resulting in a clear movement once again towards Indigenism. The 1950s West-oriented avant-garde art began to be considered as *the establishment* (Kapur, 2014, pp. 44-45). The new Indigenism emerging was on the other hand "fruitful in the artistic as well as social context – a search for essence and authenticity within the morass of contemporary Indian culture" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 44-45).

In an extensive interview with curator and critic Natasha Ginwala in 2011, Geeta Kapur elaborates on how the 1960s saw the birth of a strong and sustained understanding and pedagogical framework of modern and contemporary art in

India, starting in institutions such as the Fine Arts Faculty of the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda, followed later also by Kala Bhavana in Shantiniketan. Visual culture and curatorial studies were added to the increasingly complex curricula, in turn affecting the course of art history studies within which the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi is currently leading (Ginwala & Kapur, 2011).

This period also coincided with a broadening of aesthetic experiences amongst art professionals like critics and art historians who began attending conferences internationally. This provided them with the opportunity to broaden their scope of critical theory and address questions concerning critical curatorship and creativity. Artists also began participating in international exhibitions and workshops; as such, the 1990s marked the beginning of openings for Indian critics and curators to exhibit Indian art internationally, as well as a show of interest amongst non-Indian curators to include contextually relevant contemporary art from India in their oeuvre. Kapur affirms that the nineties thus marked the start of significant changes in the contemporary Indian art scene. These included the arrival of transcultural criteria and influences that indirectly impacted not only the creation and language of new artists, but also offered private Indian galleries self-learning opportunities which helped them to enter the international circle; initially through auctions, and slowly, also through art fairs and collaborative shows and exhibitions (Ginwala & Kapur, 2011).

Amongst Geeta Kapur's most major contribution to the discourse of Indian art is a collection of essays that she wrote over a period of fifteen years, from the mid-1980s through to the 1990s put together in a compilation titled, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Kapur, 2000). The leading essay, *When Was Modernism* was named after a lecture given in 1987 by the Welsh Marxist theorist and literary critic, Raymond Williams, whose work and thinking had a significant impact on Kapur and to whose lecture she was responding with her essays (Rycroft, 2012). The original essay has varied since it was first published in 1993 in the South Atlantic Quarterly journal and then later in March 1995, in the broadly Marxist *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (JAI) and more recently as one of a compilation of essays published in the year 2000 by *Tulika Books*, New Delhi; under the same title, *When Was Modernism.* The original essay offered new critical positions on the question of Western, Indian and third world modernism and the inter-dependence possibilities that might lead to what could be recognised as *world art* (Kapur, 1995). Daniel J. Rycroft asserts that *When Was Modernism in Indian Art* "is a pivotal text" (Rycroft, 2012, p. 206), in that it presents questions of "inter-cultural approaches to knowing and unknowing, to learning and unlearning" (Rycroft, 2012, p. 206), in the context of world art.

As stated earlier, Kapur herself was the founder and editor of the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (JAI); which was for many years amongst the major reviews of art and cultural studies published in New Delhi. The JAI was amongst the most significant initiatives in building a theory around artistic practice and ideology in

the Indian context. It involved the active participation of artists, literary and art critics as well as theatre and film specialists. The following issues involved multidisciplinary intersections that explored pop culture, film studies and new art history. Geeta Kapur wrote some pioneering essays on Indian cinema and as Vidya Shivadas asserts, the JAI "preceded the formation of the discipline of cultural studies in Indian universities by almost a decade. It finally folded in 1999" (Shivadas, 2009, pp. part 8, para. 14). Vivan Sundaram – Geeta Kapur's husband – asserts that the JAI came into being as a response to the need to rise and address questions regarding the political characteristics of art, following the workshops and experiences of his *Kasauli* project. The project consisted of a series of workshops including meetings, conversations and artistic encounters organised by Vivan Sundaram, beginning in 1976 at the *Kasauli Art Centre* in Himachal Pradesh, North India. Sundaram states,

> I gave a lot of time to organising the Kasauli Art Centre. It was based at the mountain home I inherited from my mother, and we held seminars, workshops and residencies for people working in cinema, theatre, and the social sciences. We also hosted well-known theorists, historians, feminists, as well as late-twentieth century northern Indian intellectuals. There was a strong sense of collectivity, but it was very informal. I helped give a curatorial structure to what was going on. For instance, I curated the show *Seven Young Sculptors*, which was a culmination of the workshops held at Kasauli in October 1984. Many of the artists at Kasauli were also part of

the exhibition *Place For People*, at Rabindra Bhavan museum in New Delhi in 1981 (Sundaram & Sharma, 2019, p. para.18).

The texts written by Kapur and other contributors for the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (JAI) have formed the basis of studies of cultural criticism and modern art in India; not only in home institutions but also around the world. These were also a direct result of the Kasauli project (Sundaram & Sharma, 2019). An example of the far reaching influence of the Kasauli project through the JAI is to be seen at the School of World Art studies and Museology in the University of East Anglia, where the subject 'Modern Art in India'– previously called 'De-Colonisation and Visual Culture in India'– is shaped by the JAI. Rycroft asserts that "the text is imbricated in an ongoing dialogue between universal and particularist approaches to art and its histories/futures" (Rycroft, 2012, p. 207). On elaborating about how the diverse art disciplines have been formed and interacted in India as interdisciplinary entities Kapur asserts that the

> *Journal* is generally recognized as having initiated and archived the first phase of cultural theorizing in India. Those thrity [sic] some issues of the Journal (1982-1999) were an article of faith: the project was ingenuous and advanced in the way it proceeded to address all the arts at once: literature, theatre [sic], architecture, cinema and the visual arts. It privileged cultural practice which was in some measure derived from the example of IPTA –

> Indian People's Theatre Association – an inspirational moment of cultural activism in the collective memory of the Indian Left.
>
> The discipline of cultural studies, a radical intervention at the time of Stuart Hall (and his generation), has not only acquired full institutional status, but is now systematized to become, perhaps, an over-signified pedagogical curriculum in (especially the US) academy. From that perspective, the Journal can be seen as a somewhat maverick enterprise. What needs to be acknowledged is that the authors and their diverse engagements were also in their own way systematic. They offered a historicization of art practices within a very broadly Marxist framework.
>
> I have to add that formal protocol, transgressions, surprise and the eccentricity of art practice still gives me my own agenda; its precipitate discourse and interpretive affect lures me more than the curricular structure of cultural studies. But that is, I suppose, on account of my being a polemical critic and not a well-appointed scholar; or, on the other hand, a writer caught within an aesthetic bind…The Journal gained its historical and cultural valence from such fairly upfront and often contrarian positions within and beyond the editorial team that ran it for over fifteen years (Parameswaran, Dev, & Kapur, 2015, pp. para. 10-12).

Kapur's book published in 2000 also with the title *When Was Modernism* expands the margins of Indian modernism offering an alternative non-western or

non-euro centred view of modernism. Saloni Mathur states that at least three of the theoretical essays of this volume were published in the well-known London journal *Third Text*. Mathur further asserts that "these revised pieces – dealing with cultural production and the new global political economies – have been widely cited by international audiences who remain indebted to Kapur's insightful formulations of emerging trends in the 1990s" (Mathur S. , 2002, p. 98). The book is an extremely rich compilation of in-depth studies on a selection of modern Indian artists, alongside interpretations of specific artworks, relatively recently written theoretical and critical writings as well as a section on modern Indian film. It also provides the reader with over three hundred and fifty illustrations, many of which have been unpublished hitherto. In the preface of the book Kapur highlights

> […] the pictures present something of a parallel argument to the one articulated in the text. This is not only because illustration if crucial to any discussion of the visual arts but also because I want to make a strong case for the remarkable visual narratives that cultural practice in India throws up. And for the iconographic augmentation of contemporary life that emerges as a consequence (Kapur, 2000, p. x).

Considering that the documentation of modern Indian art is relatively scarce, the illustrations have in in many cases been taken directly from primary sources. Kapur clarifies that even when using primary sources discrepancies in the information that has been provided may be found due to the ongoing

inadequacy of documentation of Indian art. She also categorically declares that her book in not an art book, although it strives to provide the appropriate representation of visual culture, nor does it aim to chronical the history of modern Indian art. She states:

> It is a book of essays where the visuals go in and out and play different roles. In the essays about artists and filmmakers there is what one might call an internal game of putting complementary images in place. In the essays that discuss polemical categories the pictures provide a cue to scuttle foregone conclusions. Whether the images have representational value or are abstracted an eccentric, I would like to see them surface like alternative currents in the discursive scheme of the book (Kapur, 2000, p. x).

As such, the essays in Kapur's book, *When Was Modernism* seek to offer a critical intervention through questions regarding the state and place of modernism in contemporary Indian cultural practice through diverse views of modernism. She opens up the question of modernism as well as positions on postmodernism specifically in the Indian context as following an alternative route to Western modernism. She argues that

> […] modernism has no firm canonical position in India. […]; sometimes it serves to make indigenist issues and motifs progressive; sometimes it seems to subvert if not nationalism, then that on which it rests and purports to grow, that is, tradition. Thus paradoxically placed, modernism in India does

> not invite the same kind of periodisation as in the west. […] modernism as it develops in postcolonial cultures has the oddest retroactive trajectories, and that these make up parallel aesthetics. […] We should see our trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international. Similarly, before the west periodizes the postmodern entirely in its own term and in that process also characterizes it, we may have to introduce from the vantage point of the periphery the transgression of uncategorized practice (Kapur, 2000, pp. 292-297).

What is clear is that Geeta Kapur is concerned with the distinguishing characteristics of Indian modernism from the West. She confesses to having dedicated her life to the question of modernity and the

> […] place of modern in contemporary cultural practice in India and in the third world, to set up an ideological vantagepoint to view modernism along its multiple tracks. Modernity, or in the more specific case of art practice modernism, is my vocational concern and commitment (Kapur, 2000, pp. xii-xiii).

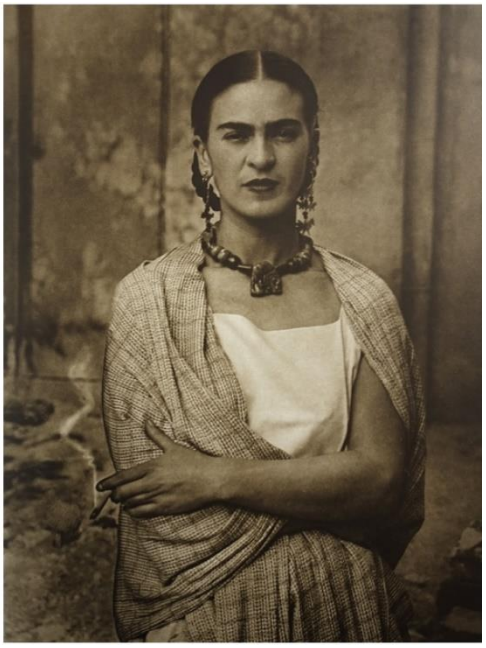
Geeta Kapur opens her seminal collection of essays with a chapter titled, *Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work*. This extensive essay is mainly dedicated to a quest for the common canon in the work of four artists; Amrita

Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo, Nalini Malani and Arpita Singh. Kapur raises the question of whether art work where the subject of the painting is the artist herself – "both deliberately seen to be overlapping entities with complex iconographic intent" (Kapur, 2000, p. 4) – is a feature that is specific to women artists, and whether this is feminist art practice. She draws a comparison amongst the many experiences and characteristics that Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo shared in their childhood and as young adults, two artists who never met, working in different parts of the world as contemporaries; both situated at the very inception of modernism within the elaborately distinct contexts of their *Third World* regions.

Geeta Kapur elaborates on the highly complex, charming and vivacious personalities of these two intensely brilliant women artists who were both of mixed parentage and whose lives were in diverse manners marked by tragic destinies. Kapur considers it necessary to seek a relationship between Sher-Gil and Kahlo as contemporaries with "nationalist considerations about the *native* woman of genius in her excessively embodied inevitably idealised form" (Kapur, 2000, p. 5). Kapur also highlights that

> Amrita Sher-Gill made an irreversible social space for the woman artist within Indian art and she did this on an expressly romantic belief: a libertarian brief learnt in bohemian Paris […]. As a logical counterpoint, she held fast to a severity in the code of art practice that suppressed all domestic and feminine expectations (Kapur, 2000, p. 5).

According to Geeta Kapur's analysis, Amrita Sher-Gil has become a reference point for many Indian women artists, even if, as in many cases, this might be as an alternative to the legend of her larger than life, seductive, genius personality, which has been clearly immortalised not only by her art but also by her early death. See: (3.1.1) FIGURE - 58 and (3.1.1) FIGURE - 59.



(3.1.1) FIGURE - 58 A & B

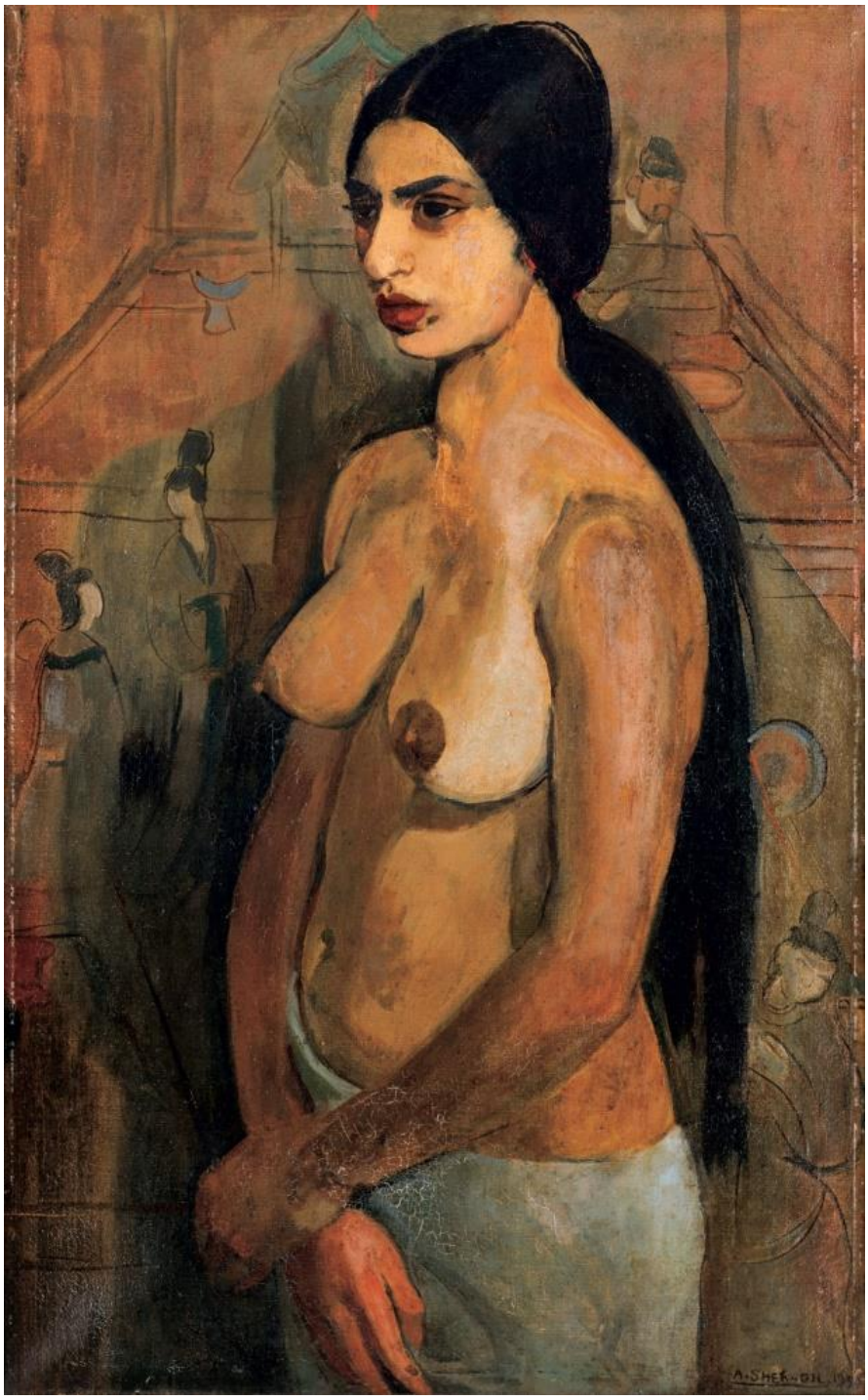
A – Dalip Singh, (c. 1930). Amrita Sher-Gil, (c. 1937).
Courtesy and © V. Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Portrait in Letters & Writings*, Vol. 2, Tulika Books, New Delhi, (2010), p. 626. Retrieved from: https://www.sothebys.com/en/artists/amrita-sher-gil

B – Guillermo Kahlo, (1932). *Portrait of Mexican Painter*, Frida Kahlo by Guillermo Kahlo, (1932). Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frida_Kahlo,_by_Guillermo_Kahlo_3.jpg

Kapur states that while Sher-Gil built her overtly larger than life persona on what she considered as her creative license to carry through with her excesses of energy in all forms; most contemporary women artists are dealing with the disjuncture that feminism introduces through individualised subjectivity processes.

> Thus even when beginning from the same vexed prerogative that Sher –Gil exercised, which is to *represent* women in and through their experiences of otherness, contemporary women artists take up a more reflexive subject-position. Sher-Gil […] was deeply protective of her women subjects and allowed them their seclusion; functioning without the feminist discourse, she dramatized her own self instead. Today's contemporary artists, including Nalini Malani and Arpita Singh, stretch the sexuality of the female body to collide against the male gaze with some unpredictable consequences. But while the imagery may be exposed and violent their own status is maintained at a more every day, ironical level (Kapur, 2000, p. 5).

Nalini Malani's painting titled, *Old Arguments about Indigenism,* painted between 1989 and 1990, portrays Frida Kahlo and Amrita Sher-Gil together offering what Kapur asserts is a "concealed reference to issues continuously raised in Indian and third-world art" (Kapur, 2000, p. 23). The painting portrays Frida Kahlo and Amrita Sher-Gil holding what look like dolls or babies in their lap.



Amrita Sher-Gil, (1934). *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian*. [Oil on canvas].

Courtesy of and from the Collection of Vivan and Navina Sundaram. Courtesy of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India.

Retrieved from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/self-portrait-as-a-tahitian-amrita-sher-gil/dAGHEww-Rs-bkw

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 59

As Kapur points out, the fact that none of the artists had children, Sher-Gil because she didn't want any[94] and Kahlo as a result of injuries suffered in a devastating bus accident, renders the images referring to children a "ghostly presence. The common acknowledged visceral pain of love, coitus and childbirth, taken to be definitional in a woman's psychic life, is here offered in compressed and lacerated iconography" (Kapur, 2000, p. 23). See: (3.1.1) FIGURE - 60.

Nalini Malani is considered by Kapur as the natural heir to Sher-Gil and Kahlo; she conveys larger social issues through an allegorized autobiography. Kapur further asserts that autobiography was slow to develop as a genre in painting although it was an obsession with women writers; as such, both Sher-Gil's personalised portraits and unquestionably Kahlo's oeuvre represent significant achievements. In examining the work of Nalini Malani, Kapur points out her beginnings in the early 1970s, when she began to portray female trauma in her otherwise normal expressionist oil painting. However, increasingly, Nalini Malani began to portray "the masochistic injunctions of a body receptive to violence were worked out into an experience of female being as survivor" (Kapur, 2000, p. 24).

[94] Amrita Sher-Gil's death has been attributed in many instances as being the result of a fatally botched abortion carried out by her medical husband, Victor Egan (Mzezewa, 2018).

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 60

Nalini Malani, (1989). *Old Arguments on Indigenism*. [Acrylic and oil on canvas]. Gift of the Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, US. Courtesy and copyright of Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/old-arguments-on-indigenism/XQEQ8hBJvYg4ng?hl=en

She continued throughout the 1980s to work on pieces portraying women's struggles. Having visited a retrospective exhibition of Frida Kahlo's work in 1982, Nalini Malani began to paint small scale watercolours; which, according to

Kapur, made subtle connections with Kahlo's work. Meanwhile, in assessing Arpita Singh (1937) Kapur asserts that she is

> […] heir to the burden of female ennui and erotic reverie of Amrita Sher-Gil […] She is at the same time a worthy sequel to Frida Kahlo in that she breaks the cycle of female masochism by an act of profound reparation and makes the woman's body whole again (Kapur, 2000, p. 39). See: (3.1.1) FIGURE - 61; (3.1.1) FIGURE - 62.

In her essay *Body as Gesture*, Geeta Kapur also explores the work of other Indian women artists like Nilima Sheikh and Madhvi Parekh. She points to the interrelation within the work of all these artists who she states have "found ways to deal with women's proverbial melancholy, to give it a comic/tragic face, to open it out into narratives" (Kapur, 2000, p. 39). Kapur's *When was Modernism* offers a vision of the highly complex story of Indian modernism through an alternative discourse that is a far from simple. As Saloni Mathur states, "it is a highly meditated, ambivalent awkward hike through the century – a story of Indian artists 'riding on the backs of paradoxes' (Kapur, 2000, p. 147)"; (Mathur S. , 2002, p. 99). Arguably few intellectuals or theorists have offered such an expansive or imaginative vision of the development of modern visual culture in India, as Geeta Kapur.

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 61

Nalini Malani, (1986). *Woman Destroyed II*. [Watercolour on paper]. Courtesy and copyright of Nalini Malani Retrieved from: http://jnaf.org/artist/nalini-malani-1946/

It is well known that Geeta Kapur is practically unique amongst Indian art theorists and scholars in her usage of the term *avant-garde* in the context of Indian art. Rachel Weiss – writer and Professor of Arts at the *Art Institute of Chicago* – states that Geeta Kapur adopted the term into her vocabulary when she was invited to speak at a conference of the *Third Havana Biennial*, in 1989 (Weiss, 2018).

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 62

Nalini Malani, (1988). *Manipulating Reality*. [Oil on canvas, triptych]. Private collection, formerly from the Collection of Chester and Davida Herwitz. Courtesy and copyright of Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/nalini-malani-b.-1946-82b07a99c5

In an interview with Professor Weiss, Kapur highlighted how there was an aversion to employing the term in India because of its close association with hegemonic Western discourses. However, in Havana, Kapur found that the term could be employed without the limits of Western dominance. Weiss states that the trip to Havana ended up proving pivotal for Kapur, in the context of the concepts and definitions of the avant-garde and internationalism in Indian art.

Kapur stated in her interview with Weiss that she was enthralled to discover that Latin America boasted an internationalist and indigenist discourse that discussed an avant-garde practice that was often challenging if Western canons

while also engaging and being critical of them. Kapur states that she found the experience transforming.

> […] it was in that context that I think my entire vocabulary almost turned around and changed, and I felt able to relate to internationalism in a certain way, and particularly the avant-garde in a certain way . . . the live encounter with intellectuals, with artists, with the ambience, with this self-confidence, and the affirmative and celebratory nature of that whole society and of the Latin American intelligentsia [was crucially important] (Kapur, as cited in Weiss, 2018, para. 2).

In her interview with Mathur and Weiss, Kapur suggests that the usage of avant-garde is valid in the context of the profound and varied cultural purpose and explorations that permeate practices of art and life at an expansive political level, worldwide (Kapur, Mathur, & Weiss, 2018). Kapur points to the origins of avant-garde of the twentieth century as being defined by the 1920s revolutionary period of the Soviet Union which shaped the political vanguard and created a space for utopian art thought. "Despite ideological vicissitudes, Soviet art of the 1920s remains the historical avant-garde of the twentieth century" (Kapur, 2018, p. para. 4).

As such, she also asserts that the modern world witnessed successive decolonisation movements which peaked in the mid twentieth century. Activist Artists developed a radicle consciousness as they participated in anticolonial

struggles and embraced responsibilities as citizens of new national states; thus effectively altering the course of the principles of avant-garde, previously defined solely by twentieth century Western art. Geeta Kapur proposes that *avant-garde* as a term needs to be imbued with "dense and diverse cultural annotation […] to give valence and purpose to the key avant-garde dialect, namely, the imbrication between art and life across the widest possible political scale" (Kapur, as cited in Mathur, 2018, para. 1). Kapur further states that her engagement with modern and national aesthetics from a Southern avant-garde perspective has been affected by the increasing critique of the agendas of the nation-state as well as with the usage of avant-garde.

> Both, the national and the avant-garde paradigms are considered to have been superseded; the periodization of modernism, the exigencies of a global economy, the call for a global public sphere, and the vision of a heterotopic cultural ambit, makes redundant the resistance and radicalism that my chosen categories claimed. The assertion of independence declared by the decolonized peoples, and the utopian universalism of the avant-gardes are features of a lapsed twentieth century (Parameswaran, Dev, & Kapur, 2015, p. para. 14) .

However, Geeta Kapur asserts that she continues with no intention of forsaking to employ the terminology of nation-state and avant-garde alongside utopianism as valid historical markers of the modern and its deconstruction.

Kapur however acknowledges that with the current trends of behaviours and thought, “The categories must of course be radically recalibrated precisely by taking into account the critique posed by alternative positions, even outright refutations” (Parameswaran, Dev, & Kapur, 2015, p. para. 15).

Kapur further explains her position with these words:

> My work (as art writer and critic who serves as a cultural theorist outside the academy) attempts formal analysis and contextual critique of contemporary practice that has become strongly conceptual, archival, documentary and self-reflexive. More ambitiously, it attempts semiotic reading, and writerly interpretations of individual art works. Good sense persuades me to withhold any claims to linguistic investigation as inscribed within the semiotic/structuralist grid; or claims to hermeneutic readings with philosophic extrapolations built into the interpretative process. Thus it is with a relatively modest methodology that I approach the issue of difference and give it the shape of alterity? A contingent category that extends itself to political/activist ideologies as well as to agonistic forms of cultural difference and cutting-edge art practice. It is also what ignites the aesthetic regime to which in a sense I am bound (Parameswaran, Dev, & Kapur, 2015, p. para. 16).

The identification of art practice in India since the 1990s as avant-garde is present in much of Geeta Kapur’s writing, especially evident in many of the

theoretical essays to be found in her anthology *When Was Modernism* (2000). Kapur's proposed avant-garde viewpoint is taken specifically from the perspective the geopolitical South. She proposes to underline the postcolonial with an avant-garde discourse as a useful and valid means of defining and expressing "modes of resistance […] qualified with 'dense and diverse cultural annotation', in order to give it new purpose and life" (Mathur S. , 2018, p. para. 6). Clearly Geeta Kapur's discourse poses challenges to the narratives of transnationalism, neoliberalism and globalization as the basis through which to renew the concept and vocabulary of avant-garde. She recounts the narratives of what is clearly a fragmented state shaped by the trials and struggles of its marginalised population. As Mathur states, "her account of a 'disaggregated' society, defined in and through the struggles of India's marginal constituencies along gender, caste, and tribal inequalities, presents a disparate political geography that does not presume such a social totality" (Mathur S. , Geeta Kapur, 2018, p. para.6).

Amongst some of Kapur's major shows is the 1981 ground-breaking exhibition titled *Place for People* alongside artists Vivan Sundaram and Nalini Malani, amongst others. Mathur states that the exhibition project had significant consequences for Indian art because

> […] it asserted the primacy of discourse (by seeking to retheorize traditions of narrative painting), and forged a dialogical relationship between the critic and six artists included in the show. It stands, in other words, as an exemplary instance of how the manifesto, the "poetic shout" of the

> twentieth century, has already been seized and re-scripted for India by Kapur, and the malleability of her successive engagements with the form (Mathur S. , 2018, p. para. 9).

The *Place for People* exhibition originated from an alliance formed in the 1970s between the Baroda and Bombay artists with left-wing affiliations and a renewed concern for realism. The renewed interest in realism was also aroused by Vivan Sundaram's – Amrita Sher-Gil's nephew – Kasauli workshops. Vivan Sundaram asserts that,

> After 'body' comes the word 'figure'. For most of the members and allies of the Progressive Artist Group (PAG) an influential group of Indian modernist painters operating between 1948 and 1956, during the period after Independence, and for a long time after that, the human figure constituted the existential, the relationship to being. Among those of us who convened in Kasauli and eventually exhibited in PLACE FOR PEOPLE, however, there was a strong attempt to find subjective, social, and historical ways to locate the body. We wanted to articulate an ideological position in favour of figuration (Sundaram & Sharma, 2019, p. 20).

(3.1.1) FIGURE - 63 A & B

A – Ajai Sinha, (1981). Review of *Place for People* in The Sunday Observer, (8th November, 1981).
B – The six artists who participated in the *Place for People* exhibition, including Nalini Malani in the centre and Vivan Sundaram – Geeta Kapur's husband – (on the right), in Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi, 1981.
Retrieved from: https://takeonart.wordpress.com/2011/08/05/place-for-people-an-introduction-parvez-kabir/

Kamayani Sharma states that *Place for People* is recognised as a watershed show that marked a change from the post-independence art practice to an art practice that was located within "a new set of socio-political circumstances. The artists, informed by meetings and discussions at Kasauli, reacted to the abstraction and high formalism that typified the work of the generation before them. So the figure comes back, narrative comes back" (Sundaram & Sharma, 2019, p. 19). Geeta Kapur further clarifies that *Place for People* was a *self-generated* project

involving six artists and a critic at a time when the concept and term *curator* was not used. She asserts,

> I functioned very simply as a member of a group or collective. This was therefore not my exhibition: though this misunderstanding continues — an amusing anachronism based perhaps on those later battles where I, and others, would actively claim the nomenclature and rights of a curator. Place for People began with the theorising of narrativity. The works developed simultaneously and even as a consequence of the discourse on contemporary narration, as a still-valid mode within an honourable and inclusive art-historical frame of narrative painting. […] All the artists involved were exploring locality, class, and the politics thereof. I think *Place for People* came about because the artists were committed to maintaining a dialogic basis for their evolving practice and believed therefore that a critic (and her theoretical/ideological concerns) were 'necessary' to the formation. […] What remains from the days of *Place for People* is an engagement with history and subjectivity, and the politics of place, whether it is the nation or city or imagined and contested site. However, *Place for People* did change the direction of Indian art by producing both straightforward and contrary consequences. (Ginwala & Kapur, 2011, pp. para. 4-9).

Following the *Place for People* endeavour, Kapur delves into changes and diversions in subsequent projects to include alternative art language and media-

based practices. The 1990s specifically was period marked by Geeta Kapur's growing interest in exploring art forms of other regions through curatorial projects in emerging biennials of Asia and Africa. As such she was involved in the Havana biennale, the Asia Pacific triennial and the Johannesburg biennale. Kapur saw these events as particularly relevant in their potential to stage exchanges and dialogues that moved away from Western or Euro-American centric art scenes.

In 1992, the demolition of the 16th century Mughal Babri Masjid – Babur's Mosque – in Ayodhya, in north east India by Hindu nationalists led to bitter and bloody Hindu Muslim clashes and riots with conflicts that resulted in enormous death tolls, especially in the Muslim community. Geeta Kapur has dedicated enormous space to what Vidya Shivadas highlights as a period that marked a watershed moment in which the political and social implications and repercussions were explored and portrayed by a whole generation of artists[95] (Shivadas, 2009).

Kapur began to examine artistic reactions to political and social situations where artists began to engage with popular culture and the public space, creating work that provided testimonies or bore witness to occurrences. Some of her curatorial projects thereon include: *Dispossession*; a show that focused on four women artists, held from 28 February to 30 April 1995 at the *1st Johannesburg*

[95] See AAA Burger Collection Keynote Lecture: Geeta Kapur | Citizen Artist: Forms of Address at https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/geeta-kapur-citizen-artist-forms-of-address

Biennale. The artists were Sheela Gowda (1957), Nalini Malani (1946), N. Pushpamala (1956) and Nilima Sheikh (1945). The theme *Dispossession* alludes to Kapur's suggestion that women in general and women artists share the ability to gather strength and energy by redefining in the process of sharing stories of pain, vulnerabilities and absence or invisibility in history.

> There is dispossession that is destinal, even voluntary. […] There is dispossession that is to do with circumstance: labour, refuse, sacrifice, theft, arson and poverty. […] In a related spirit Pushpamala gathers the remains of a despoiled city – Bombay with its flesh and blood drained after the 1993 communal riots. These are objects from an excavation, from the great urban pit, signalling survival; paper shells from the fragile world of the victims – books, bundles, boxes – a gift of inside-out containers for the dispossessed (Kapur, 1995, p. 156).

The first Johannesburg biennale also marked a turning point for South Africa after decades of cultural isolation caused by self-imposed sanctions and prohibitions. It included more than 250 artists from 80 countries and although not without controversy, did successfully bring into question the hitherto monolith definition of high culture, according to Western perceptions and standards (Kapur, 1995); (Silva, 2019).

In 2001 Kapur co-curated with Ashish Rajadhyaksha the project *Bombay/Mumbai 1992-2001*, as part of a multi-city exhibition at the Tate Modern

in London, titled *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis.* The exhibition explored the relationship between the modern metropolis and cultural creativity and included nine cities around the world with a focus on diverse time periods. *Century City* was premised on exploring the *creative flashpoints* and *pivotal artistic and intellectual movements* that the participating cities had generated as representive of the global tendencies and innovative trends in art, architecture, dance, film, literature, music and design while also reflecting the specific and particular culture and context of the cities themselves, (Century City; 1 February – 29 April 2001).

In 2003, Geeta Kapur curated the show *subTerrain: artworks in the cityfold*, in the *House of World Cultures* in Berlin. *SubTerrain* was a multi-arts project that sought to make a statement regarding Indian contemporary art with a focus on "art practice in the social, political and psychic 'subterrain' of third world 'global cities'" (Kapur, 2003, p. para. 2). The project featured the work of sixteen artists and their distinct statements and reactions to diverse social and political issues in the Indian megalopolis using the title *Body City: New perspectives on India*. Most of the work shown was being exhibited for the first time in Europe and included painting, photography, installation and video art.

The pieces raised questions "about bodies and subjectivity in the context of urban cultures, democracy and the political dimension of space and place, and tensions between the local and globalisation" (SubTerrain: artworks in the cityfold, 2003, p. para. 1). The artworks offered a critical and complex view of

diverse standpoints from the point of urban structures and the boundaries where the individual and social merge. Kapur states,

> I propose situating the artist (here, the Indian artist) in an uneasy 'subterrain', in the 'dug-outs' of the contemporary, where s/he reclaims memory and history; where the levelling effect of the no-history, no-nation, no-place phenomena promoted by globalized exhibition and market circuits is upturned to rework a passage back into the politics of place (as cited in asianart.com, 2003, para. 3).

Geeta Kapur remains an invaluable independent intellectual and critical voice, offering both an academic and objective narrative and theory of the Indian art world in diverse historical contexts. As a curator and writer, she critically and theoretically addresses questions that continue to construct the narratives and discourse that link distinct art and cultural practices, thus providing insights into identity, history and moments of historical relevance within Indian as well as global contexts. Her latest writings are due to be published in a new volume titled, *Ends and Means: Critical Inscriptions in Contemporary Art*, (Asia Art Archive, 2013).

3.1.2. AMRITA SHER-GIL (1913 –1941)

Sinha asserts that modern Indian women artists, in their construction and representation of women, broke away from the idealised classical image of women as subjects in Indian art. […] classified women in the category of *devi*, *nayika*, *ganika* (goddess, heroine courtesan), which were well entrenched in art (Sinha, et al., 1996, p. 9). The arrival of Amrita Sher Gil (1913-1941) marked the moment when the representation and narrative of the ideal women as subject was altered definitely. Amrita Sher Gill hailed from a highly intellectual and artistic family. Her father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil was a Sikh aristocrat, a photographer "of remarkable merit" (Kapur, 2000, p. 4), as well as a scholar in Sanskrit and Persian. Her mother Maria Antoinette was a Hungarian Jewish opera singer, hailing from a cultivated, middleclass German Catholic family settled in Budapest (Mitter, 2007). And her younger sister, Indira Sundaram was the mother of the famous contemporary artist intellectual Vivan Sundaram, who as we have seen previously is married to the eminent art critic – cited numerous times in this study – Geeta Kapur. Her uncle was Ervin Baktay, renowned Hungarian Indologist (David, 2016). See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 64

Her distinguished heritage meant that Amrita Sher-Gil was privileged in the education she received and the intellectual influences that surrounded her.

(3.1.2) FIGURE - 64

Vivan Sundaram (2001). *From the series Re-take of Amrita.* [Digital photomontage]. National Portrait Gallery, UK. Courtesy of the artist. Reproduced with permission of the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Retrieved from: https://www.portrait.gov.au/content/vivan-sundaram

This digital photomontage by artist Vivan Sundaram, Amrita Sher-Gil's nephew offers an intimate portrait of the four family unit, with his aunt and Amrita's mother, Marie Antoinette, Hungarian opera singer in the background mirror frame, Amrita and her father the intellectual amateur photographer in the central area and Amrita's younger sister, i.e. Sundaram's mother Indira, in the foreground. This belongs to Vivan Sundaram's series that mixes "[…] fiction, fact and fantasy to reconstruct the 'history' of a glittering and elite Sikh family against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial India. Umrao Singh Sher-Gil (1870–1954) – family patriarch, amateur photographer and follower of visionaries, Tolstoy and Gandhi" (Balaram, 2020, p. para. 3).

She was educated in Italy and Paris under the instruction of influential artists and scholars of the time. According to her nephew, Vivan Sundaram, she spent approximately half her life in Europe and the other half in India (Sundaram, 2008). Sundaram also asserts that her arrival on the Indian art scene in 1935, as an independent artist coincided with a crucial timing in India's political, cultural and artistic development. "Modernism was naming itself in a very rich and complex way […] even the first naming from a leftist point of view of the word progressive" (Sundaram, 2010, p. min. 1:20). On her arrival to India, her work was profoundly influenced by the poverty she witnessed in rural India and the increasing nationalism of the 1930s. Although Amrita Sher-Gil also painted what is considered to be one of her most recurrent themes – "the enduing muse of classical Indian art" (Sinha, et al., 1996, p. 9); her mixed Indian and European cultural background and artistic training, added to her fascination for the wall paintings of the Ajanta caves in Aurangabad, Maharashtra; helped her establish a painterly style of representation and narration that was distinctly *woman* rather than *goddess* or *nymph*.

Widely recognised as one of the most outstanding artists to be present at the inception of Modern Indian Art, Sher-Gil first made her appearance on the Indian art scene in the mid-1930s, (Kapur, 2000). Her appearance at the commencement of modernism in Indian art led to what Kapur terms as the "inadvertent 'feminization' of modern Indian art" (Kapur, 2000, p. 4). Geeta Kapur also states that Amrita Sher-Gil "saw herself in a pioneering role in the development of

Indian painting and in effect became a point of transition from revivalist Indianism to what may be called 'modernistic art'" (Kapur, 2014, pp. 38-39). Partha Mitter considers Sher-Gil to be the first "professional woman artist in India" (Mitter, 2001, p. 194). From the body of work that she left behind, despite her early demise, it is evident that Amrita Sher-Gil sought through much of her oeuvre to represent the existentialism of the rural populations, especially the peasant women of the time. The eminent specialist Indian social science, art historian and curator, W.G. Archer stated that Sher-Gil "was the first significant Indian artist to make the rural poor her major subject" (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 62). In her own words:

> As soon as I put my foot on Indian soil, my painting underwent a change not only in subject and spirit but in technical expression, becoming more Indian. I realised my mission then: to interpret the lives of Indians, and particularly of the poor Indians, pictorially, to paint the silent images of infinite submission and patience, to depict the angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness, to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 62).

Many scholars have speculated about Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings and her sensitivity towards the poverty of rural India at the time. She is said to have perceived India as being dejected and starving immersed in abject poverty and misery. The ground breaking Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand speculated about

whether Sher-Gil's sensitivity and human concern were the consequence of her western intelligentsia influence or Picasso's blue period. (Tillotson, 1997). Anand acknowledged that although Sher-Gil hailed from a background of exceptional privilege, she formed part of what was seen as "the new young intelligentsia from big houses of that time, charged with indignation against injustice and full of human concern" (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 62).

Anand interpreted Sher-Gil's renowned painting titled *'Three girls'*, painted in 1935, as young girls awaiting arranged marriages, who were destined to be "condemned in their early life, to fade away after being given, with dowry, to husbands unknown to them" (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 63). See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 65. Mulk Raj Anand himself was one of India's literary giants whose body of work focused on highlighting the plight of the impoverished and lower casts of India. He used his work to analyse and depict extremely perceptive and sensitive insights into the lives of the oppressed; these included poignant studies regarding interests in the maintenance of impoverishment and exploitation by India's social structures of the time, as well as British rule. Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings were of particular interest to Anand, who analysed her work in the following words,

> She had seen the Indian people from the point of view of the outsider, who wanted to become and insider. And she had accepted them in all their moods, because in the amorphous world of bazars, in the villages of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, in Simla, they were a colourful crowd, who excited her

> love of colour. And yet she seems to have perceived, even when they were in a fair, that each one of them was alone. Specially [sic] the women who were segregated both in rich and poor households (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 63).

Sher-Gil was without a doubt a phenomenon; she continues to hold an iconic position in modern Indian art and occupies a central position in Indian modernism. She "made an irreversible social space for the woman artist within Indian art" (Kapur, 2000, p. 5). She was known to have ruptured traditional boundaries using her talent, nonconformist behaviour and legendary beauty to achieve the status that she currently holds, despite having died at the very young age of twenty eight. "In the action-filled seven years 1934-41, Sher-Gil pursued a vigorous painting career, crossed swords with the art establishment, met prominent Indians including Jawaharlal Nehru, […].

By the time she died her fame had spread all over India (Mitter, 2007, p. 50). Karl Khandalavala, art critic, friend and mentor who chronicled her life declared in no uncertain terms that Sher-Gil was "the most vital force in modern Indian painting of her time". […] "The sheer power of her finest canvases […] transcended anything that had hitherto been achieved in modern painting even by the most notable pioneers of Bengal Renaissance" (as cited in the Deccan Herald, 2011, para. 5). In the documentation of an exhibition in 2007, Ann Coxon of the Tate Modern states that "Amrita Sher-Gil's vibrant canvases and her short but

dynamic life have established her as one of India's most celebrated modern artists" (Coxon, 2007, p. para. 1). As a woman and particularly an Indian woman, albeit of mixed heritage, Amrita Sher-Gil was to a large extent and as a result of diverse factors able to overcome the power structures which, – as feminist art historians have attributed – traditionally erased women artists from the centre stage of art history discourse.

However, as Partha Mitter also points out, she did suffer her share of prejudice and discrimination within the male-dominated art world. While in France she was seen as the "mysterious little Hindu princess" (Mitter, 2007, p. 51); both in Europe and India, her art work was never credited with its deserving praise and value without mention being made of her beauty and female status. As if the fact that a woman could be beautiful as well as create art work of such quality was unexpected and surprising, See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 67 and (3.1.2) FIGURE - 67.

As mentioned in previously, Sher-Gil has on many occasions been compared to Frida Kahlo her Mexican contemporary who was also born from mixed cultural heritage. Partha Mitter compares Sher-Gil's painting *The Two Women*, painted in 1938 as an "allegory of the fragmented" (Mitter, 2007, p. 59). Hungarian and Indian self, with Frida Kahlo's painting, *The Two Fridas*, painted in 1939 and representing her European and Mexican Indian self.

(3.1.2) FIGURE - 65

Amrita Sher-Gil, (1935). *Three Girls.* [Oil on canvas]. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India. Retrieved from : https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/amrita-sher-gil/amrita-sher-gil-room-2-return-india

Geeta Kapur states that "it is significant that another woman artist of fabled charisma, Frida Kahlo of Mexico, is a virtual contemporary of Sher-Gil. Like her, she is marked by a tragic destiny", (Kapur, 2000, p. 4). Kapur also points out that both Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo were only "part-native" (Kapur, 2000, p. 22) which in turn affected the discourse of national culture that their work represented. According to Kapur, Sher-Gil and Kahlo's mixed racial origins caused conflict in the "unifying dream of a nation" (Kapur, 2000, p. 22), thereby causing a clash in the definition of identity which in turn affected important masculine figures such as Leon Trotsky – in the case of Kahlo – and Jawaharlal Nehru, albeit briefly, in the case of Sher-Gil. However, Kapur also points out that their mixed heritage befitted them with a personal sovereignty that was not unusual amongst aristocracy which thus afforded them a unique freedom and control over their own destinies. The awareness brought about by their particular positions meant that they could "carry off subaltern personifications on behalf of the community" (Kapur, 2000, p. 22).

On June 20, 2018, Tariro Mzezewa penned an article in a new section of the New York Times labelled *Overlooked* in which he wrote the following headlines, "Overlooked No More: Amrita Sher-Gil, a Pioneer of Indian Art. With her paintbrush, Sher-Gil explored the sadness felt by people, especially women, in 1930s India, giving voice and validity to their experiences" (Mzezewa, 2018, p. para. 1). Mzezewa also alluded to the comparison with Frida Kahlo stating "With

her style and her emphasis on women, Amrita Sher-Gil became known as the 'Indian Frida Kahlo'" (Mzezewa, 2018, p. para. 1).

After some years in Paris and having finished her art education in the *Ecole des Beaux Artes*, Sher-Gil moved back to India in 1934. While in Paris, her art education was enhanced by her interest in the work of Gauguin, Cezanne, Van Gogh and Modigliani, amongst others. On her return she is said to have made such sweeping statements as "Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse and many others, India belongs to me" (Singh N. I., 1975, p. 213). She is also said to have expressed a desire to see "the art of India break away and produce something vital connected with the soil, yet essentially Indian" (Mitter, 2001, p. 194).

There are clear signs that her exposure to the Tahitian paintings by Gauguin played an important role in imbuing in her an interest in primitivism and her proclaimed artistic mission already cited earlier, "the interpretation of the lives of poor, mute, unsung Indians, 'the silent images of infinite submission… angular brown bodies strangely beautiful in their ugliness'" (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 62); (Mitter, 2001, p. 194). However, as G.H.R, Tillotson argues, Gauguin's influence on Sher-Gil's art, attributed in all likeliness due to the colours she used in paintings such as *'The Red Clay Elephant'* and *'The Red Verandah'* (Tillotson, 1997, p. 59), does not detract from the other factors at play in her artistic journey. See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 68.

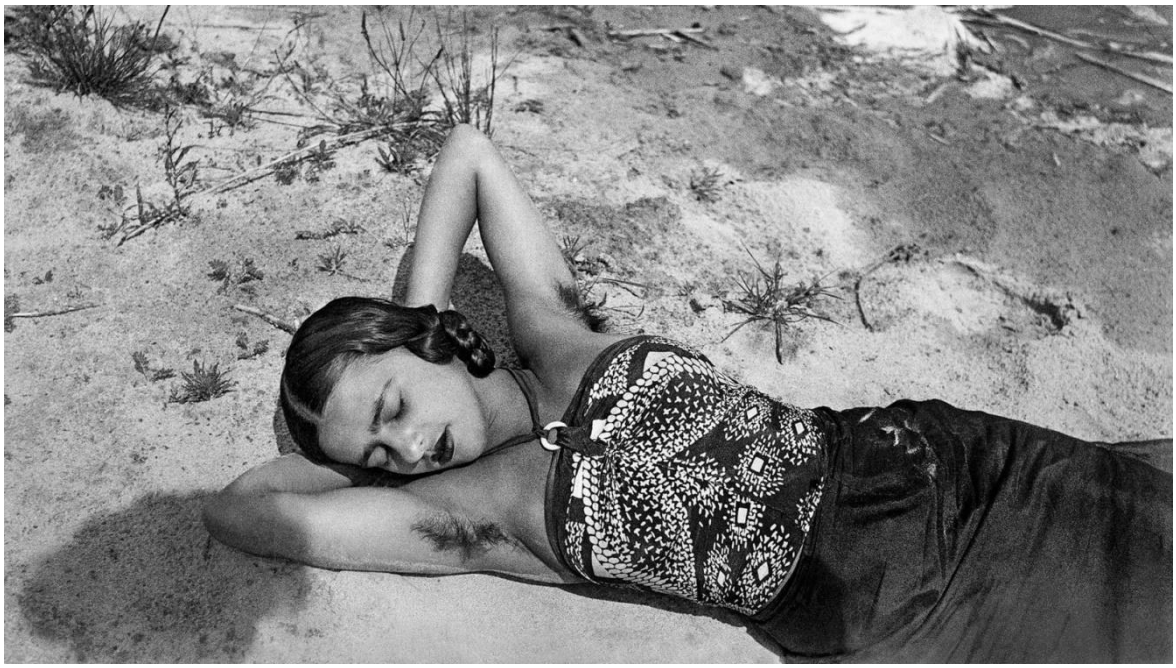
Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, (1935). *Amrita.*

Simla, India. From the Sher-Gil archives/ Photoink.

Retrieved from: https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/umrao-singh-sher-gil-archives-gil-photoink-delhi-exhibition/

Courtesy of and © Vivan Sundaram.

(3.1.2) FIGURE - 66



(3.1.2) FIGURE - 67

Victor Egan, (1933). *Amrita Sher-Gil*. Courtesy of and from the Sher-Gil Archives and Photoink. [Gelatin silver print with selenium toning]. Limited edition of 10, exhibited at Photoink booth exhibited for the first time at the India Art Fair, 2018. Courtesy of Vivan Sundaram.

"Victor Egan's 1933 portrait of Amrita Sher-Gil, shows the avant-garde artist in languid recline with unshaved armpits. The photograph perfectly captures Sher-Gil's rebellious spirit. As an artist who flouted established social and artistic norms; and whose work was preoccupied with feminist inquiry" […] (Kumar & Iyengar, 2018, p. para. 5). Retrieved from: https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/india-art-fair-jagdip-jagpal/index.html

As stated previously, tracking Sher-Gil's oeuvre makes it clear that a large body of the work she created while in India was centred on the subject of women and life in the villages. Tillotson asserts that W.G. Archer locates Sher-Gil's work firmly within the "rural poverty and increasing Indian nationalism" (Tillotson, 1997, p. 62) of the 1930s. Tillotson also refers to the words of the

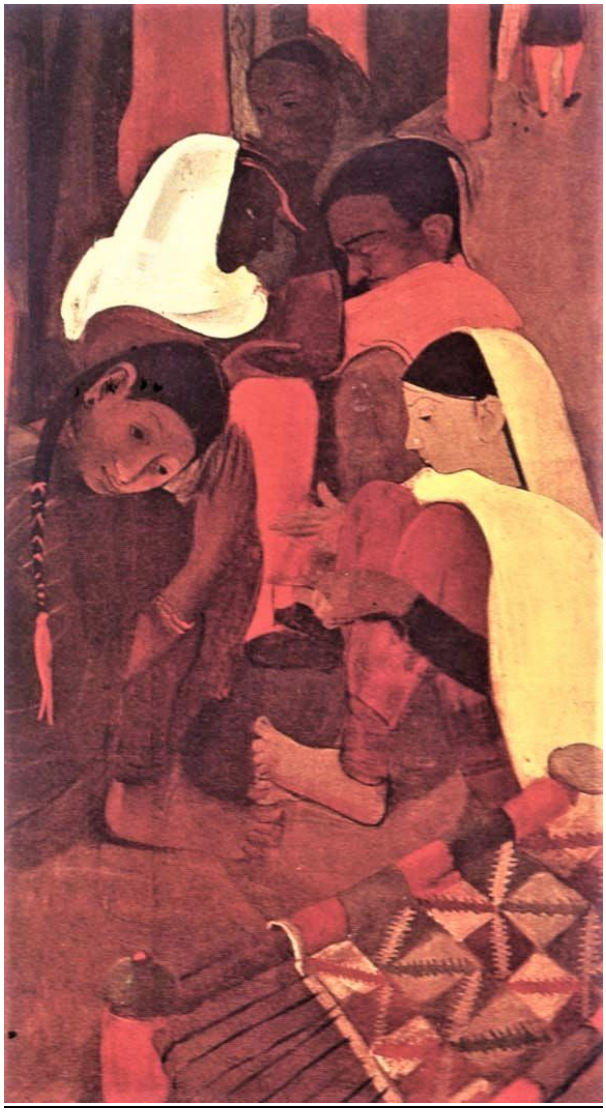
poet, Baldoon Dhingra who is said to have known Sher-Gil very well, since she was a child. Dhingra states about Sher-Gil that

> It was inconceivable that the abject poverty and misery of her people should fail to stir to the depths so penetrating and thoughtful a creature. For a while, the grimness around her quenched her humour, sharpened her irony and kindled her indignation (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 62).

Mulk Raj Anand went further; pointing out that when she first returned to India after studying in Paris, Amrita Sher-Gil had been an 'outsider' who was enchanted by the colours of the villages in Punjab, Utter Pradesh and Simla. She sought to become an 'insider' even while perceiving that as regards the women in "the amorphous world of the bazars […] each of them was alone […] segregated […]. And she brought an ambivalent attitude in tune with the ambivalence of the people: Together and yet alone" (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 63). She seemed to have been particularly concerned by the fate of young women who she felt were "contemplating marriage […] in awe of the future … condemned in their early life, to fade away, after being given, with dowry, to husbands unknown to them" (as cited in Tillotson, 1997, p. 63). As commented earlier, her painting titled, *Three girls* highlights this particular concern. See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 65.

Although Amrita Sher-Gil's melancholic portraiture painting is generally applauded as representing her unique sensitivities and artistic skills, a reflection of her reaction to the poverty and limitations afflicting the rural populations;

there have also been criticisms. Those who have categorised her work in terms such as "lyrical renderings of India's subaltern populations amounted to an easy aestheticization of the issues; her aristocratic class background and the social distance created by her European education and upbringing were both her personal "failing and that of her art" (Altaf Mohammadi, as cited in Mathur, 2011, p. 540).



(3.1.2) FIGURE - 68

Amrita Sher-Gil, (1938). *Red Verandah*
[Oil on Canvas]. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India. Courtesy of NGMA:

Retrieved from: https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/amrita-sher-gil/red-verandah/

Assuming that this harshly damning critique held water, it arguable does not take into account the myriad factors regarding Amrita Sher-Gil's journeys between India and Europe, her mixed heritage or personal relationships or even her own personality and how these must have undoubtedly influenced her reaction, vision and perspective of the rural societies she portrayed in her paintings.

Saloni Mathur refers to a part of this phenomenon as "Sher-Gil's modern consciousness" (Mathur S. , 2011, p. 539) and her "unique way of dealing with belonging and unbelonging [sic]" (Mathur S. , 2011, p. 539). Edward Said, so poignantly penned his analysis on the subject of belonging and identity in the following words, "Seeing the world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision," (as cited in The Guardian, 2001, para. 8). Although not strictly in exile, Amrita Sher-Gil must have experienced many of the conflicting emotions that accompany the ongoing experience of not quite belonging, which accompanies many of us who have wandered amongst cultures and countries while at the same time making and calling them home. As such, it is not in any way surprising that she possessed the "plurality of vision" (as cited in Mosley, 2004, p. 293) to which Said refers and which remains inaccessible to most individuals; a vision that provides a unique "awareness of simultaneous dimensions" (as cited in Mosley, 2004, p. 293) and one that clearly informed her artistic journey.

In her meticulously researched and lovingly crafted biography of the artist, Yashodhara Dalmia, – eminent art historian – often refers to the myriad aspects of Sher-Gil's volatile personality and musings.

More significantly, Dalmia offers the reader the luxury of snippets from conversations, letters, diaries and numerous other intimate archives. In an extract from Malcolm Muggeridge's diary, – the British Journalist who was ten years older than Amrita and with whom she had a short but tumultuous affair – Muggeridge refers to Amrita as being engulfed in "inner conflict" (as cited in Dalmia, 2006, p. 71), which he also asserted visibly impregnated her art.

Yashodhara Dalmia refers to Amrita as having a "subterranean consciousness, a feeling that there was a world beyond" (Dalmia, 2006, p. 20), despite her own wealthy, aristocratic background. Dalmia also asserts that many of Sher-Gil's painting were indirectly also representative of the conflictive and discordant relationship between her parents, and the resulting uneasy atmosphere that accompanied her childhood. Her mother, Marie Antoinette had what would appear to be an undiagnosed bipolar personality, veering intermittently between spells of euphoria filled with the joy of life to acute depression and suicidal tendencies. "The incompatibility between husband and wife was to cause anxiety, even anguish, to their children, particularly Amrita, as revealed in her vivid sketches" (Dalmia, 2006, p. 21).

The result of these varied factors was that Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings were "neither sentimental nor pictorial but went beyond mere aestheticization of poverty to a reappraisal of deprivation and the attitude of the privileged" (Dalmia, 2006, p. 74). Arguable, Sher-Gil's diverse background and travels as well as her volatile personality and conflictive childhood, all played a part in providing her

with the critical intellectual vision and practice described by Edward Said in his acclaimed book, *Reflections on Exile* (Said, 2001). As brought up earlier, in his book, Said refers to people who have been forced into exile. Clearly this was not Sher-Gil's case, nevertheless, as already seen, Said affirms that the fact of having been displaced gives rise to an awareness and critical consciousness that is "at odds with the prerogatives of the settled collective and the 'thumping language of national pride'" (as cited in Mathur S., 2011, p. 540).

Thus, Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings bear the stamp of modernism and historical innovation partly brought about by her own personality and home environment, and also by the afflictions of cultural displacement that she sustained. These in turn made her highly sensitive to the lives and struggles of the rural populations of India, and particularly to the plight of women; arising not only from poverty but also as a result of cultural mal practice. During her education in the *Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts* in Paris, as previously stated, Amrita was naturally exposed to French Modernism, impressionism and post-impressionism. This included the work of artists like Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani (Dalmia, 2006). As a result, she was equipped with the necessary tools and perception that enabled her to develop the autonomy necessary to take full advantage of the new tendencies that "allowed for a multiplicity of viewpoints and means to negotiate their trajectory of modernism" (Dalmia, 2006, p. 193). See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 69.

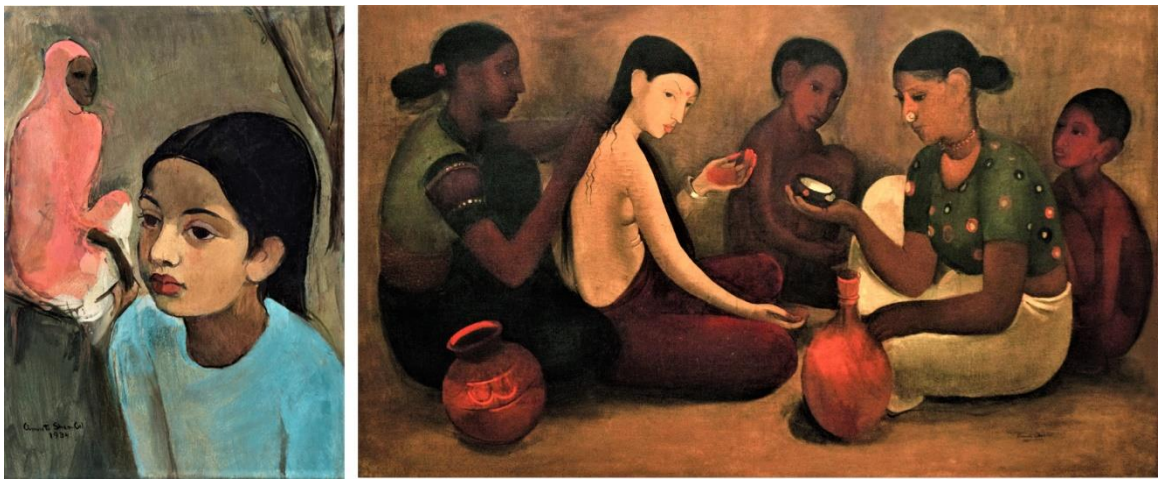
Her Indian heritage was particularly relevant here, as she experimented and manoeuvred her artistic trajectory, exploring her dual identity and "exoticness" (Coxon, 2007). As stated earlier, amongst the artists whose work Amrita specifically admired or perhaps even identified with, Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh stand out in particular. Apparently, Amrita's first encounter with Gauguin was during a visit to the London National gallery. Out of this encounter she was to paint her extremely famous *Self Portrait as Tahitian* in which, according to Coxon, "she self-consciously plays on her status as the exotic 'other' in metropolitan Paris" (Coxon, 2007, pp. Room 1, para. 6). See: (3.1.1) FIGURE - 59.

From all accounts, Amrita was highly inspired and influenced by Gauguin, the above self-portrait providing almost irrefutable evidence of this admiration. In a letter she wrote to her art critic friend Karl Khandalavala, she is said to have marvelled at finding Gauguin's rendering of his subjects and backgrounds comparable with the miniature Basohli paintings of Jammu and Kashmir.

> Lovely those Basohli-things […] I have also been looking at the Gauguin. […] the similarity is startling. There is also another of his that is very Basohli […] How significant of the fellowship of all great art that a mind of such different origin as Gauguin should have a common atavism with the Basohli miniaturists (as cited in Dalmia, 2006, p. 148).

Yashodhara Dalmia states that Amrita's portraits inspired by Gauguin's Tahitian maidens represented a yearning in her to connect to nature; to what was simple and natural as well as a desire for increased personal freedom, release from the constrictions of high society. There were significant points of interest between the two artists when considering Said's theories of displacement and identity. Gauguin's few early childhood years spent in a privileged Peruvian home after an abrupt departure from Paris, his adoration for his maternal grandmother, the socialist activist writer Flor Tristan, and his sudden and abrupt return to France to conditions far removed from his luxurious lifestyle in Peru; inevitably informed his vision and art.

However, while Gauguin's paintings from this period were "reconstructed images of a lost paradise which did not exist even in his time" (Dalmia, 2006, p. 194); Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings are infused with the true essence of the people and especially the women whom she documented. She was the first artist in India to depict the ordinary man and woman within the harshness of their existence, their resignation to the reality of their unchangeable fates as well as their intense longing for something different. Thus, she succeeded in visually raising them to a plane that brought about a new and significant awareness and sensitivity towards their plight. Yashodhara Dalmia places Amrita Sher-Gil amongst the women artists who occupied a mainstream position within the largely male dominated modernist art movement that was in motion around the world during the first decades of the twentieth century.



(3.1.2) FIGURE - 69 A & B

A – Amrita Sher-Gil, (December 1934). *The Little Girl in Blue*. [Oil on canvas]. Painted when she was 21, *The Little Girl in Blue* fetched the highest bidding price of any of her works in India in a Sotheby's auction in Delhi in November 2018 (Cascone, 2018). The painting which had not been viewed in public for 80 years sold at18,68,75,000 rupees (over 180 million rupees almost 2.5 million Euros). Dated 1934, the painting which measures 48 x 40.6 cm is of Amrita's 8 year old neighbour, Lalit 'Babit' Kaur. Initially exhibited in 1937 as part of her debut show in Lahore, it was later acquired by art historian Charles Fabri. It was put back on the market after eight decades by Sotheby's, and is only the seventh oil painting by Amrita Sher-Gil to have been offered anywhere in the world.

Retrieved from: https://southasia.typepad.com/south_asia_daily/2019/06/amrita-sher-gils-highest-price-at-auction-.html
https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/amrita-sher-gil-portrait-comes-to-market-after-80-years

B – Amrita Sher-Gil, (1937). *Bride's Toilet*. [Oil on Canvas], 146 cm x 88.8 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India.
Retrieved from:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Amrita_Sger-Gil_Bride%27s_Toilet.jpg?uselang=fr

Dalmia asserts that Sheer-Gil was a contemporary of artists like Kathe Kollwitz, Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, within the modernist movement (Dalmia, 2006). In striving to attest to this we can also draw attention to the

striking similarity in terms of subject matter in the art of German artist Kathe Kollwitz and Amrita Sher-Gil. The focus on the human condition expressed through haunting portrayals of victims of misery, hunger and war, to be found in Kollwitz's lithographs, etchings and drawings; give rise to uncanny echoes of Sher-Gil's portrayals of the rural population of India. Both women worked against a painful backdrop of personal pain and conflict alongside sentiments of anguish and horror at the state of human suffering. See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 70.

However, it is Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo with whom Indian art historians and specifically Geeta Kapur – as seen earlier – have drawn the most parallels as regards Amrita Sher-Gil. Kapur asserts that Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo as contemporaries – even though they never met – gave form to what Kapur frames as "female valorization within national cultures" (Kapur, 2000, p. 14). Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo shared mixed nationalities and apparently a Hungarian connection. Frida Kahlo stated that her father was a Hungarian Jew (Herrera, 1983), although there are accounts that he was actually of German descent (Cooper, 2018). Her mother was Mexican of Spanish and Native American descent. Both Frida and Amrita took to dressing in the traditional costumes of the national spaces they occupied.

> Soon after marrying Rivera in 1929, Kahlo changed her personal and painting style. She began to wear the traditional Tehuana dress that became her trademark. It consisted of a flowered headdress, a loose blouse, gold jewelry, [sic] and a long ruffled skirt (Zelazko, 2018, p. para. 3).

Kapur cites from Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's documentary, stating that Frida Kahlo developed her own individualised and personalised sense and imagery of "Mexicanness" (as cited in Kapur, 200, p. 55), using flamboyant traditional jewellery and Tehuana costumes to convert herself into a "Mexican artefact" (Kapur, 2000, p. 55). The Tehuantepec women from southern Mexico are said to enjoy a particular and specific mythic reputation as a result of their unique personal and economic self-reliance.

Geeta Kapur states of Amrita Sher-Gil that she also, "dressed in gorgeous saris, a flamboyant beauty flaunting her unmatched artist persona" (Kapur, 2000, p. 52). Yashodhara Dalmia elaborates further, referring to the moment when Amrita decided to settle permanently in India.

> For the rest of her life Amrita would wear gorgeous saris in rich, deep colours, chunky silver jewellery set with jade and turquoise stones and makeup that defined her dark, glowing eyes and the lovely curve of her mouth. […] If all this was a little theatrical, she looked stunning and attracted attention wherever she went. In the process, she proved that aesthetically it made better sense to resurrect the rich fabrics and designs of India than to imitate the fashions in vogue abroad (Dalmia, 2006, pp. 59-60) .

(3.1.2) FIGURE - 70 A & B

A – Amrita Sher-Gil, *Mother India,* (1935). [Painting]. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, India. Retrieved from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/mother-india/4wEg15tTOJU0-A

B – Amrita Sher-Gil, *Tribal Women,* (1938). [Painting]. Retrieved from: https://www.wikiart.org/en/amrita-sher-gil/tribal-women-1938

Within this context, in referring to Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo, Kapur states that they both

> […] dressed in ethnic style, flaunted their beauty, unleashed a cruel humour, and dramatized desire. At the same time they cultivated a degree of self-absorption that came probably from bisexuality, but also from a reclusive sense of self that produced in the end an oddly compact identity for the female subject (Kapur, 2000, p. 55).

Curiously, just like Sher-Gil's father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Majithia, photographer and scholar who dedicated the vast body of his work to self-portraits and photographing his daughters; Frida Kahlo's father, Guillermo Kahlo was also a photographer and prominent figure in Mexico's national intelligentsia. As a young child, Kahlo helped him in the studio while also posing for him in front of the camera. As such, from an early age Frida Kahlo was aware of what can be termed the gaze or look of the observer.

> Kahlo learned to pose for the camera, often gazing straight at the camera with her characteristic defiance. "This awareness of the onlooker, through the eye of the camera, but also of her own reflection, marks the beginning of her self-made image," points out Ruiz. "Later she shapes this image through her choice of clothing and her painting, especially in her self-portraits, both driven by her cultural and political commitments." (Ana Baeza Ruiz, as cited in (Cooper, 2018, p. para. 9).

It would be safe to assert that the *hybrid identity*– as Geeta Kapur terms it – of these two artists was fundamental not only in defining the artistic journeys but also in shaping the larger than life artistic personas of both Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo. As Kapur asserts,

> […] in countries like Mexico and India ethnicity wears exotic colours in considerations of culture, especially when the bearer of that culture is a

> woman. […] feminine masks are flaunted by the artist who plays alive her roles one by one, as woman, as native (Kapur, 2000, p. 16).

Within this context, both artists used construed narcissism to reinvent the concept and style of what determined *Indianness* and *Mexicanness*, drawing the observer almost inadvertently into what might be considered their desire to be fetishized. In 1939, while on a visit to Budapest, Amrita Sher-Gil painted one of her largest and irrevocably sensual paintings, the previously mentioned, *Two Girls.* Frida Kahlo painted her famous *The Two Fridas* in 1939. Both paintings present us with two figures, one dark skinned, non-European and the other fairer skinned, apparently European. As Partha Mitter states, it is difficult not to read into both these paintings clear allusions to the "fragmented self" (Mitter, 2007, p. 59). See: (3.1.2) FIGURE - 71. Meenakshi Thapan's statement "The woman's body is the foundation on which gender equality is built, established and legitimised, understanding the female body in different contexts, settings and situations none the less remains an urgent research prerogative" (Thapan, 1997, p. 3), becomes particularly relevant in the context of Amrita Sher-Gill and Frida Kahlo.

On November 29, 2018, Amrita Sher-Gil's *The Little Girl in Blue,* painted in 1934 was auctioned in the inaugural sale for Sotheby's India, – tagged *Boundless: Mumbai,* – at 2.54 million dollars (Cascone, 2018). See: (3.1.2)

FIGURE - 69 A. Yamini Mehta, International head of Indian and South Asian art at Sotheby's stated,

> There exist few, if any comparisons in the history of art to Amrita Sher-Gil. The influence she wielded in her tragically short life was enormous, […]. With her avant-garde approach, not only in her technique and style, but in her presentation of female subjects, she shaped the future art of in India perhaps more than any other artist of the time (as cited in Cascone, 18, para. 8).

The art critic Charles Fabri stated that through her work Amrita Sher-Gil "built a perfect bridge between the artistic vision of the West and that of India" (as cited in Cascone, 18, para. 10) considering that she was particularly well placed for providing that link due to her mixed European and Indian heritage.

(3.1.2) FIGURE - 71 A & B

A – Amrita Sher-Gil (1939). *Two Girls.* [Oil on Canvas, 58 x 90 cm], Budapest, Hungary. Courtesy of Vivan and Navina Sundaram Private Collection, New Delhi, India.
Source: https://art1stindia.wordpress.com/2018/09/28/from-india-and-the-world-a-gallery-tour-of-masterpieces-on-200-year-old-freedom-struggles/

B – Frida Kahlo ((1939). *The Two Fridas.* [Oil on Canvas]. Courtesy of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico. Retrieved from: https://www.galeriavalmar.com/en/las-2-fridas/

FIGURE - 72 A & B

A – Amrita Sher-Gil, (1937). *South Indian Villagers Going to Market*. [Oil on canvas]. Courtesy of the Navina and Vivan Sundaram Collection.

B – Amrita Sher-Gil, (1935). *Hill Women.* [Oil on canvas]. Courtesy of the Navina and Vivan Sundaram Collection.

Retrieved from: https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/amrita-sher-gil/amrita-sher-gil-room-2-return-india

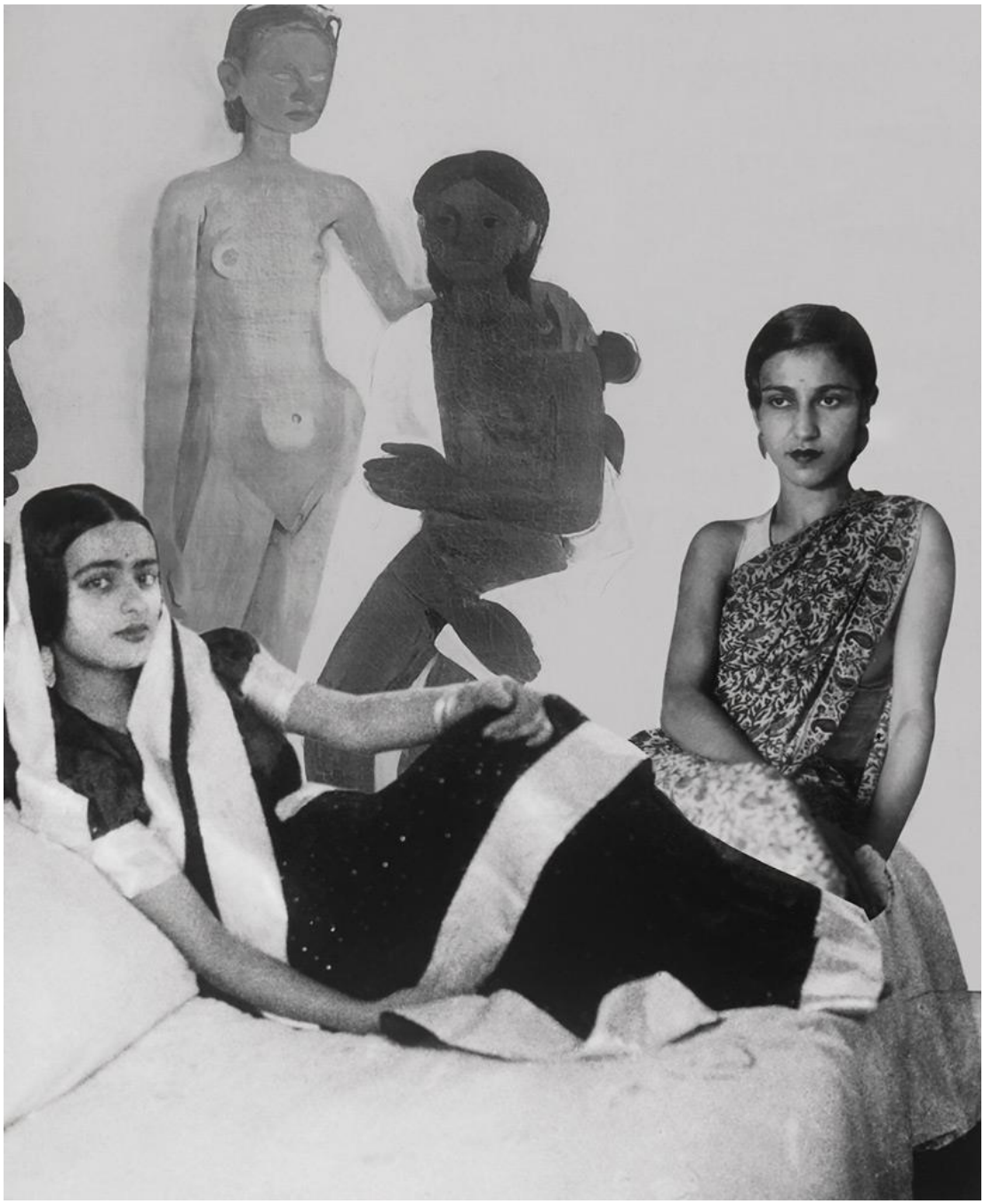


FIGURE - 73

Vivan Sundaram, (2001). *Sisters with 'Two Girls'* [Digital photomontage 38.1 x 31 cm]. (Amrita, Simla, 1937; Indira, Simla, early 1940s, Two girls, detail, 1939, by Amrita Sher-Gil). National Portrait Gallery, UK. Copyright and courtesy of the artist. Retrieved from: https://www.portrait.gov.au/image/14559/14508/

3.1.3 MEERA MUKHERJEE (1923–1998)

Meera Mukherjee was in her mid-twenties at the time of India's independence and the India Pakistan partition. In the context of the practice of visual arts in the 1970s and 80s in India, Meera Mukherjee was almost unique in her choice of sculpture, specifically the choice of bronze, considering the physical attributes that are required to work in the medium. She wrote at one point, "I knew I wanted to involve myself in creation involving hard physical labor. Sculpting was the most natural culmination of this urge"; (as cited in Maja Von Rosenbladt, p. 77, 2018). Meera Mukherjee is as such one of the pioneer artists of India who paved the way for future women artists at a time that was crucial in the history of post-colonialism, Indian modernism and contemporary culture. Post-independence was a key moment in Indian history as regards the creation of a newly modern, post-colonial cultural identity. Both Amrita Sher-Gil and Meera Mukherjee were major contributors towards creating and defining the modern Indian artist.

Meera Mukherjee was born in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal; situated on the east bank of the river Hooghly in East India. She went to study at the Indian Society of Oriental Art School when she was 14, later enrolling at the Delhi Polytechnic in 1947 – coinciding with independence– where she went on to acquire a diploma in painting, graphics and sculpture (Klein & Singh, 2019).

FIGURE - 74

Courtesy and copyright of Artist's archive and Akar Prakar. Courtesy of Mapin Publishing. *Meera in her early days* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 10).

In 1953, Meera Mukherjee travelled to Germany to study at the *Hochschule fur Bildende Kuenste* in Munich. She initially started studying painting, but soon dropped it for sculpture, the medium which would become her favoured form of creation and through which she was to later acquire international recognition. Partha Mitter has categorised Meera Mukherjee as "the most outstanding Indian sculptor to emerge in post-independence period" (Mitter, 2001, p. 227).

Meera Mukherjee did not consider herself to be a feminist; as such she denied that there was any feminist content to her work preferring to be recognised as an artist above all, the fact of being a woman being of secondary importance. Mitter states that Meera Mukherjee was "impressive in her austerity, enjoying her isolation and self-imposed poverty" (Mitter, 2001, p. 229). Tapati Guha-Thakurta elaborates on this aspect of the sculptor's personality, stating that "To meet Mukherjee is to encounter a wall of privacy" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 48). Meera Mukherjee, as one of the most significant sculptors of the Indian art scene escaped being part of a specific school or movement; instead, she became well-known for her "constitutive image as a lonely, struggling, individual, immersed in work, oblivious of the demands of wealth and publicity" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 48).

Meera Mukherjee is known to have suffered from severe mental distress, anxieties and panic attacks; clearly her deep, almost exclusive absorption in her work served to channel her mental trauma towards a constructive and therapeutic end. In a revealing article titled *Sculpting for Liberation*, the activist writer, Maitreyi Chatterjee stated of Meera Mukherjee, "as familiar tensions increased she

retreated more and more into her art as an outlet for the anguished, tormented and scarcely-relieved darkness of her personal life", (as cited in Maja Von Rosenbladt, p. 77, 2018).

As a woman artist and sculptor, Meera Mukherjee was unique for that period in history in her success in fully integrating herself into the male-dominated world of *Dokra* casting traditions of the Bastar district in central India. *Dokra* is a traditional technique of bronze lost wax casting that varies from the classical lost wax techniques and process. The Bastar bronze casters build their figures using long spiral threads of beeswax built over an armature or core of clay and sawdust. After applying a coat of clay paste to the final beeswax mould and tying the whole structure up with metal wire, the piece is heated to melt the wax and liquid bronze is poured into the spaces created by the spirals of melted wax. Large sculptures need to be made using many separate moulds that are welded together leaving the seams of the sections joined visible.

Fred S. Kleiner states that many contemporary Asian artists suffer from the dilemmas of identity that come from having received their art training in Europe or other lands outside their home countries. As such they often face the fundamental conflict of "how to identify themselves and situate their work between local and international, traditional and modern, and non-Western and Western cultures" (Kleiner, 2010, p. 44). Meera Mukherjee managed to eloquently bridge the experience of being an Indian artist who studied in both the Indian and Western systems. As stated previously, on her return to India from

Germany she maintained only some of the European techniques that she had learnt, but went on to embrace the 4000 year old, still very much alive, lost wax casting traditions of the Baster tribes of central India. She was able to successfully manoeuvre the dilemma of her *high-art* urban education as well as the natural "reluctance of the master craftsmen of Bastar to allow her entry into their restricted sphere of knowledge" (Sambrani, 2005, p. 15).

Her statue *Ashoka at Kalinga*, created in 1972 is considered to be one of her major master pieces and perhaps her greatest accomplishment. See: (3.1.3) FIGURE - 75 It is larger than life-size, measuring 2.5 x 1.25 x 0.60 metres and was constructed from 26 bronze-cast parts which combine the intricate surface designs of traditional Bastar artwork alongside the expressive abstract form techniques of some varieties of 20th century European sculpture techniques. Guha-Thakurta asserts that this was her first and most successful experiment with volume and extra-large dimensions involving the mixed European techniques alongside the traditional Bastar techniques (Guha-Thakurta, 1996). The statue is a portrait of the third-century BCE Maurya dynasty emperor, Ashoka, in the Kalinga battlefield, as he stood contemplating, in horror and regret the death of more than 100.000 victims of the war he had unleashed.

Horrified by the consequences of the battle, Ashoka was profoundly affected; he is known to have abandoned violence forever thereon, going on to convert to Buddhism also making it the official religion of his kingdom.

(3.1.3) FIGURE - 75 A & B

A – Meera Mukherjee, (1972). *Ashoka at Kalinga.* [26 Bronze cast parts, 2.5 x 1.25 x 0.60 metres). Courtesy ITC Maurya (Delhi). Photograph by Nayanjot Lahiri. Retrieved from: https://thewire.in/books/the-king-and-kalinga-an-excerpt-from-ashoka-in-ancient-india

B – Meera Mukherjee, *Ashoka at Kalinga* detail. [Bronze] ITC Ltd. Collection. © Artist's archive and Akar Prakar. Courtesy of Mapin publishing. Jacket Cover of *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018).

Meera Mukherjee created her masterpiece in protest of the political violence that was ongoing in India in the 1990s. Kleiner states,

> By reaching into India's remote history to make a contemporary political statement and by employing the bronze-casting methods of tribal sculptors while molding her forms in a modern idiom, she united her native land's

past and present in a single work of great emotive power (Kleiner, 2010, p. 44). See: (3.1.3) FIGURE – 75.

Most scholars agree that Meera Mukherjee's life and art have in many ways posed radical challenges to some of the main notions of modernity in India as well as the concepts of hierarchies in the arts, as per the differences between artists and artisans. She was amongst the very first of the urban Western schooled artists to draw specifically on the forms and techniques of a tradition dating back thousands of years; thus effectively and indisputably placing "the *folk* within the parameters of the *modern*" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 48). Her personal life was equally challenging of customary and accepted norms; divorced, she shied away from a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle, choosing instead absolute solitude and austerity in a life dedicated entirely to her creative process.

In 1960, Meera Mukherjee was awarded a fellowship by the *Anthropological Survey of India* to carry out an extensive survey of the metal crafts people of India. She was encouraged by the anthropologist Surajit Sinha to take the fellowship which permitted her to spend extensive periods living with the tribal communities of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Nepal and South India. The skills and experiences she accumulated in the time she spent in these communities became the defining elements of her oeuvre and artistic career (Guha-Thakurta, 1996). Meera Mukherjee's book titled *Metalcraftsmen of India,* published in 1978, is a record of three years of travel, working and living in diverse tribal

communities. It offers snippet accounts of her personal experiences with the tribal communities, alongside detailed and vivid descriptions of each of the castes and communities, their lifestyles as well as the materials, equipment and elaborative metal working techniques that they employ. She also offers information on the itineraries of her travels alongside her quests and findings.

Guha-Thakurta highlights the fact that Mukherjee's account of her personal experiences during her travels is filled with a feeling of personal discord and anguish, frustration and triumph as she struggles to position her work and self within these ancient craft traditions.

> This self-location was never free of tensions and contradictions. Continuously, then and throughout her later work, the problem would remain as to whether this celebrated exchange between modern and the folk could ever be a symmetrical one. The lines between discovering and learning on the one hand, and appropriating and transfiguring on the other, would always require to be redrawn and renegotiated (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 50).

The historian Partha Mitter elaborates on this dilemma as he highlights that even as Mukherjee felt that "every artist must also be an artisan" (as cited in Mitter, 2001, p. 227); she also came to understand that the traditional artists' world was largely circumcised while the modern individualist artist enjoyed the liberty of participating in resolving and exploring new problems and experiences.

As such, she was also acutely conscious and perhaps pained by the mostly one sided exchange where "the modern artist could profit from traditional art, the asymmetrical relationship between underclass and the elite was a dilemma that could not be easily resolved. Despite sincere efforts, the tribal must remain the other" (Mitter, 2001, p. 228).

Adding to the above issues was the fact that Meera Mukherjee had to negotiate the clear and unbridled animosity of the craftsmen who were understandably hostile towards her as a woman, possible intruder and competitor; and obviously unwilling to share the secrets of the traditional production techniques of their crafts with her. Arriving in Bastar in the midst of a period of intense political turmoil, she was met with artisans who were only prepared to offer her a certain part of their working processes; this did not include the casting processes. Tapati Guha-Thakurta states of when she was alive that

> […] to Meera Mukherjee the experience of casting is still wrapped in mystery and wonder. What was once kept from her as a jealously guarded technique would soon be hers, but it would continue to invoke in her the same mystical resonance (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, pp. 50-51).

However, the barriers that Meera Mukherjee encountered in deciphering the intricate secrets of the craftsmen's techniques led her to experiment and innovate, combining the techniques that she already knew with the new skills that she was acquiring. This allowed her to develop her own particular style and version of the

craft; she perfected a technique in bronze casting that was exclusively hers, creating also a unique iconography.

> Opposing pulls of mass and movement, strength and vulnerability give an intense character to her figures enhanced by the textural play create by the use of decorative elements on the surface. Many of Mukherjee's works show the use of Bengali calligraphy on the surface. Manifestations of playfulness and whimsy often add another dimension to her work (Dalmia, Datta, Sambrani, Jakimowicz-Karle, & Datta, 1997, p. 204).

What is unquestionable is that despite the initial problems and issues with the communities, this period was a uniquely rewarding and informative experience for Mukherjee, one that culminated in the creation of many of her most revered pieces. Approximately in March 1961, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, who was part of the *All India Handicrafts Board*, arranged for Meera Mukherjee to receive a salary while she studied bronze casting at a bronze production centre in Bangalore. This was followed by another course with Prabhas Sen, sculptor and author of numerous texts on the craftsmen of India and the living traditions of West Bengal. These opportunities permitted her to witness the work and diverse techniques of distinct artisans such as the *Dhokra* from West Bengal and Bihar, the *Khoruras* and *Ghantrars* from Orissa as well as some Nepalese *Sakya* craftsmen from Bhaktapur; – East and North Eastern India and Nepal.

Meera Mukherjee's work is charged with life and movement. Her sculptures are records of her spiritual sense, her love for music and dance and the lives of the common people of the communities which she inhabited, often in slum areas. Her work is a portrayal of the joy and pain of life; the sorrows of the common people and their pleasures too, the carefreeness of children, religious celebration and the devotion of dancing pilgrims, the sense of togetherness and belonging of communities as well as the endless toils of life. Her sculptures are made up of fishermen casting their nets, women stitching, weaving, pounding, carrying water pitchers on their heads and the general humdrum to be found in the midst of diverse everyday household chores and living.

She portrayed women and men labourers carrying loads, workers laying down cables, overflowing, overcrowded buses with commuters hanging half in and outside buses – an unbelievably common sight in Indian cities and villages. It can be inferred that to a large extent, Meera Mukherjee lived her life according to the lives of the villagers and artisans with whom she spent so much of her time. She followed the same routines as the local artists, respected the same timings for creating and casting, and used the village furnaces during the same seasons as the local casters for her work. See: (3.1.3) FIGURE - 77,(3.1.3) FIGURE - 78 and (3.1.3) FIGURE - 78.

(3.1.3) FIGURE - 76 A & B

A – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Boatmen*. [Bronze, 10.2 x 30.5 x 12.7 cm]. Private Collection. © Akar Prakar and courtesy of Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 39).
Retrieved from: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/meera-mukherjee-boatmen

B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Untitled*. [Bronze, 45.7 x 68.6 x 21.6 cm].
Retrieved from: https://www.saffronart.com/auctions/PostWork.aspx?l=4704

As stated previously, the main theme that clearly inhabits most of her sculptures is that of work, toil and daily life activities. Amongst her celebrated pieces, within this topic, is a piece titled *The Spirit of Daily Work*. It is currently to be found at the *National Gallery of Modern Art* in New Delhi. *Women in the Balcony,* and *Lady in the Sari; Fisherwomen, Boatmen, Mother and Child* are other pieces that portray the themes discussed above. See: (3.1.3) FIGURE - 77 and (3.1.3) FIGURE - 78 "The images range from the purity and earthiness of village life to the dehumanization of urban existence" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 51).

(3.1.3) FIGURE - 77 A & B

A – Meera Mukherjee, (c. 1980s). *Carpet Weavers*. [Bronze, 20.32 x 29.21 x 16.51 cm]. Courtesy of the Piramal Art Foundation Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 30).

B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Women in the Balcony.* [Bronze, 58.42 x 38.1 cm]. Private Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 45).

Less known than the pieces mentioned previously are her sculptures of animals and those portraying families at leisure, children at fun and play, and her dancers and singers. These are images of children playing hopscotch, dangling from trees, mothers, grandmothers and families sitting together quietly, as well as dogs, cats and hordes of buffaloes and elephants. Guha-Thakurta states that

"while they shed all sentimentality, these small pieces instil amazing qualities of delicacy and tenderness into the hardness and angularity of metal work" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 54).

Another favoured subject that Meera Mukherjee developed is that of music; through a significant body of work portraying singers, musicians and dancers. These reflected her little known passion for music as well as her training as a classical vocalist. Dalmia et al. assert that "Two elements mark the spirit of Mukherjee's work. One is celebration of humanism and two, a yearning for reaching beyond the quotidian and rejoicing in freedom and liberation" (Dalmia, Datta, Sambrani, Jakimowicz-Karle, & Datta, 1997, p. 204). See: (3.1.3) FIGURE - 79, (3.1.3) FIGURE - 80, and (3.1.3) FIGURE - 81.

Meera Mukherjee was known amongst collectors for seldom putting a price on her work. She was also known to have resorted to distress sales of her pieces. A notorious example is the famous sculpture, *Asoka at Kalinga,* mentioned earlier; See: (3.1.3) FIGURE - 75. The piece was bought in 1977 by a hotel chain for the meagre amount of 75,000 rupees, – the equivalent of 970 euros at today's conversion rates, (the Rupee has significantly improved since the rates of the 1970s) – a figure that would barely have covered the expense of the metal of which the sculpture is made. Guha-Thakurta has pointed out that Meera Mukherjee's life in isolation; austerity and hardship, outside the public eye corresponded to her notorious lack of interest in maintaining a record or track of the sales, and final destination of her art work.

(3.1.3) FIGURE - 78 A, B & C

A – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Mother with Children*. [Bronze, 35.56 x 29.21 x 27.94 cm]. Dr. Choubey Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 34).

B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *The Spirit of Daily Work*. [Bronze, 172.72 x 83.82 x 31.75 cm]. NGMA Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 81).

C – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Mother and Child*. [Bronze, 36.83 x 10.16 x 16.51 cm]. A. Dutta Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 34).

In 1968, Meera Mukherjee won the *Master Craftsman in Metalwork* President's Award. Recognition of her work through this award was not without irony. At the time she was already a well-known and a recognised *modern / urban* artist. It would appear that her increasing fame and status as well as the growing acknowledgment, recognition and sales of her work caused her significant and

acute discomfort as she tormented over the status and privilege being bestowed upon her versus the status of the village craftsmen with whom she worked. "It had never been her intention to displace the folk artists by the implicit publicity that was given to them in her own art" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 55).

(3.1.3) FIGURE - 79 A & B

A – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Untitled*. [Bronze, 20.32 x 17.78 x 31.75 cm]. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 36).

B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Fisher Women*. [Bronze, 33.02 x 22.86 x 22.86 cm]. Mrs & Mr Prillman Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 21).

(3.1.3) FIGURE - 80 A & B

A & B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Cosmic Dance*. [Bronze, 46.99 x 35 x 33 cm]. R. Pal Chodhury Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 16 & 17).

She thus made all attempt to resist the comfort and advantage of fame while she laboured consistently to protect and support the *Gharua* and *Dhokra* craftsmen, striving to lift "them out of their obscurity, help them with sales and

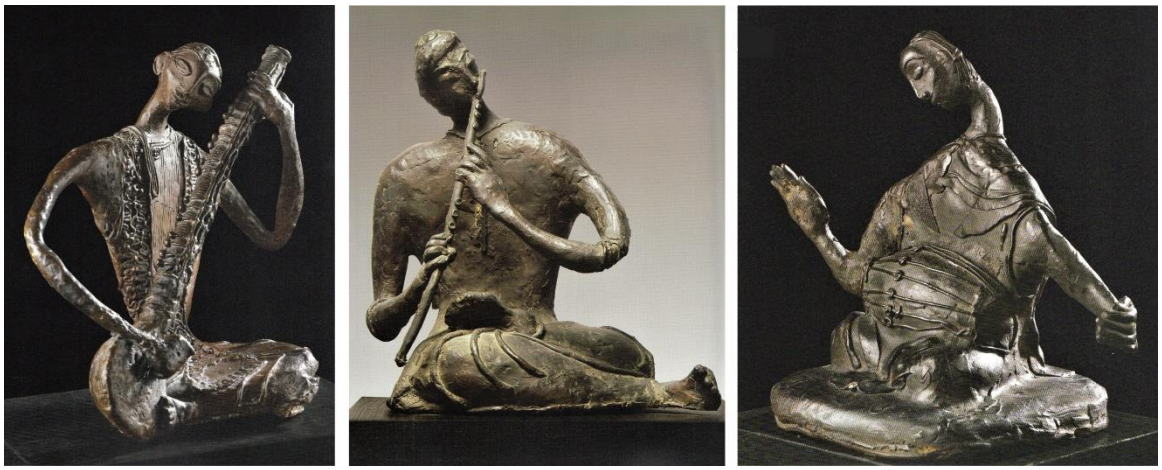
orders, create a taste and awareness of their art in urban middle-class circles" (Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 55).[96]

Maja Von Rosenbladt recounts that Meera Mukherjee created her amazing and wonderful sculptures in her small, extremely modest apartment with a narrow balcony and a studio space that was scarcely a few square metres in size. For Meera Mukherjee, her life meant creative, hard and dogged physical work requiring complete concentration. She began her day at 2:00 am in the morning, lighting the village furnace in *Elachi*, about one and a half kilometres away, a process that "sapped her energy" (Rosenbladt, 2018, p. 73). When she returned to her apartment in Kolkata she would be exhausted but her tasks were far from finished. "The process of casting as well as welding together of the pieces for bigger figures demanded her complete physical and mental presence", (Rosenbladt, 2018, p. 73).

Aspects of Meera Mukherjee's life that are relatively unknown are connected with her intense commitment to the well-being of the villagers around her. She set up a network of doctors and therapists to attend to the health care of those who were unable to afford medical treatment; she also helped children to have their school fees payed and bought warm winter clothes for them when the winters were particularly cold. She contributed actively to an informal schooling

[96] For a comprehensive and detailed study of Meera Mukherjee, including excerpts from her diaries and the children's stories she wrote, see: (Ghosh, et al., 2018).

endeavour called *Dhanket Bidyalaya* that had been set up by the socialist writer activist Nirmal Sengupta.



(3.1.3) FIGURE - 81 A, B & C

A – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Sitar Player*. [Bronze, 25.4 x 26.67 x 12.7 cm]. Amrita Jhaveri Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 84).

B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Untitled.* [Bronze 31.75 x 30.48 x 20.32 cm]. Emami Art Collection. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 18).

B – Meera Mukherjee, (n.d.). *Dholakwala.* [Bronze, 35.56 x 28.96 x 15.24 cm]. Courtesy of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art Collection. New Delhi, India. Courtesy of and © Akar Prakar and Mapin publishing. *Meera Mukherjee: Purity of Vision* (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 64).

The grass roots project developed into literacy movement involving approximately 600 children and eight schooling centres alongside libraries and health centre facilities that were managed by young people who had come out of the same system. More than half the children attending the schools were girls, and

they arrived full of expectations, sitting outside on the floor ready to learn and take it all in. Nirmal Sengupta stated,

> This is not surprising. Girls in a backward village like ours have to suffer a dull, dreary and monotonous routine existence. The free atmosphere of Dhanket is like a breath of fresh air to them which they enjoy apart from what they learn there, (as cited in Rosenbladt, 2018, p. 75).

Meera Mukherjee organised workshops and partook in their education, teaching them the ancient quilting techniques of the region, which they then converted into pieces fit for hanging. The children's designs were also used to supply the professional cloth artisans with themes for their work; she also took care of the carpet weavers and helped the villagers find employment.

> The essential effect of her devotion to *Dhanket Bidyalaya* was that she brought art to poor village children. She provided them with the impulse to draw, paint and do handicrafts. And the children too responded enthusiastically with great concentration and creativity. Art filled their day-to-day lives with colour and joy. Art was something they needed not merely for their physical survival, but for the survival of their souls (Rosenbladt, 2018, p. 76).

Meera Mukherjee continued to create well into her seventies and shortly before her demise. Understandably, her later sculptures were smaller due to her

failing health and age. However, in 1993 an exhibition was held showing what was amongst the last of the large scale creations she made; stained red in a manner that made it appear to be a terracotta piece. It is a huge woman's figure with large arms and legs, seated at a loom showing the rising and falling of the woman's weaving hands. Calling it *Ihokal*, Meera Mukherjee explained that "The rise and fall of her massive hands as she weaves symbolizes the ebb and flow of life" (as cited in Guha-Thakurta, 1996, p. 54).

3.2 – Collaborations and Transitions: From Village Art to Urban art

Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker states that although Indian historians and writers like Rabindranath Tagore, A.K. Coomaraswamy, K.G. Subramanyan and Geeta Kapur have consistently questioned "the function of art" (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 23)*;* the Indian discourse has not generated the same conflictive divide between what is considered the lesser folk or craft art verses the higher fine art, as in the West. Evidence gathered from exhibitions over the years might suggest differently; however, it is clear that traditional art practices in India as embodiments of sacred rituals and ceremonies that included dance, music and the recitation of sacred texts continue to be practised as living traditions in many instances. To shed further light on the issue, Chaitanya Sambrani asserts that

> Despite a systemic segregation between folk/tribal and modernist art, Adivasi and folk traditions have remained a point of reference for a number of urban artists, whether as a recollection into modernist gallery spaces of the artists own rural origins, or as a voluntarist invocation of folk forms in combination with modernist techniques as a means of generating an indigenist modernism (Sambrani, 2005, p. 15).

Additionally, in spite of the ever looming threat of the loss of artistic traditions due to modernisation, globalisation and the digital age; traditional art practices in many villages not only continue to play important roles in the everyday lives, ritual celebrations, festivals and ceremonial practices of the communities that practise them, but in some cases are actually enjoying a revival, (Rani, Kumar, Tudu, & Bora, 2016).[97] In concordance with Sambrani, Lutzker also points out that one can often perceive an intersection of traditional art traditions with contemporary practices amongst artists of India, even while they are also being influenced by foreign art practices, (Milford-Lutzker, 1999).

The nineteenth century brought about the first art academies based on the British Colonial models, in the cities of Calcutta, Chennai and Mumbai. These schools catalysed the beginnings of individual creativity amongst Indian artists. Lutzker offers the case of the artist Jamini Roy (1877-1972), – who was from the Bankura district of West Bengal, – as an example. Joy was an artist who studied in Calcutta, learnt about the European style of painting, becoming an accomplished portrait painter, but later become disenchanted by sombre palette and colours of the Western style. He went on to incorporate in his work the bright colours and strong lines of the folk art of his homeland, earning for himself the title of "the

[97] See: Raghurapur in Puri, Odisha; http://www.mithilasmita.com/; Mandana painting in Rajasthan; Pithora paintings by the Rathwas communities in Gujarat, amongst others.

Pablo Picasso of Asia, in reference to Picasso's incorporation of African ritual art" (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 24). Roy combined visual culture icons of Indian origin alongside those of European origin. He was thus highly conscious of the positioning of Indian art between East and West, as well as what was considered a necessary developing of "an inherently Indian Context" (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 23).

Similarly, other artists of the time such as Meera Mukherjee (1923-1998), also expressed their preoccupation with developing a modern Indian aesthetic, incorporating – in the case of Mukherjee – the study of the *Gharua* Bronze casters of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh, central India, into her work. Thus, to quote Lutzker, "without apology, Indian artists draw not only from the academy, but more importantly from their cultural background" (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 25).

In November 1996, the eminent intellectual Jyotindra Jain was director of the *National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum* – also known as the *National Crafts Museum*, – in New Delhi. He set up a collaborative workshop that brought village and tribal artists together with urban artists over a period of six weeks. Since then, the museum regularly organises programs culminating in impressive exhibitions of productions which include painting, textile and sculpture alongside music and storytelling. Folk artists and urban artists and their families come together and participate in art production as it has been traditionally done for generations alongside modern techniques. "Jain was interested in the dynamics of the interaction between artists from the very different worlds of agrarian-based

villages and the market-driven arena of industrialized cities", (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 28).

Amongst the artists who participated in the workshop is the now very well-known Arpana Caur (b. 1954). Caur worked with the Madhubani artist Sat Narain Pande using the folk images drawn by Pande as references for her painted images. The collaboration between the two artists lasted for many years. "There is so much richness and colour in tradition and myth, it's a well one can keep drawing from. I like the circle of *Warli* as it indicates time. Thread ties everybody in one bond, and, sometimes, it also breaks the bond" (Caur, as cited in Kalra, 2016, para. 14); (Kalra, 2016).

Sat Narain Pande hails from the *Godiya* area of the Madhubani region in Bihar. Caur collaborates with various artists from the area. She uses the Godiya artists´ drawings as a base for her paintings; "she layers the urban aesthetic over the village one and ironic commentary over traditional ritual, thereby creating a psychological and visual tension" (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 29). Through her paintings, Arpana Caur has probed the consequences of political and religious discord and violence. Her work has focused on issues like the 1984 Sikh massacres, in response to the then prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards; the destruction of the 16th century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, by Hindu fundamentalists on December 6th 1992; as well as the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima. Her work also documents her concern regarding the domination of technology over nature.

Navjot Altaf (b. 1949) is famous for her work with the *Bastar* community artists of Madhya Pradesh.[98] She worked with them to restore their endangered traditional art of carving wooden and stone memorial pillar, going on to use aspects of Bastar symbology and aesthetics in her own work. Altaf's work is highly permeated with social commentary. We shall examine in more detail Navjot Altaf's career and oeuvre further ahead in this study. The collaboration between urban artists and village artists is far from free of problematic questions. Arpana Caur and other elite urban artists who have not been examined in this study have climbed to the highest international rankings through their practices that have received enormous depth and virtue from their contact with tribal and village art and artists. However, their counterparts in the villages continue to subsist within the same precarious economic conditions as twenty or thirty years ago.

> The fact that urban artists have manipulated the situation of village artists reveals the distinct class, social, educational, and economic differences that exist between the two worlds. It is not surprising, therefore, that village artists are more cautious in their approach to innovation, whereas urban artists eagerly absorb and appropriate aesthetic forms […]. Village and tribal styles provide a touchstone for urban artists; they give access to

[98] For further details please visit: http://www.dialoguebastar.com/

profound aesthetic, ritual and spiritual needs that cannot be fulfilled by the prevailing postmodern and postcolonial theories at the end of the twentieth century (Milford-Lutzker, 1999, p. 30).

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 82

Ganga Devi, (1990). *Kohbar Ghar* detail. [Chamber wall painting in the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, India]. Photo courtesy of Jyotindra Jain.

One of Ganga Devi's last iconic pieces, painted while she was undergoing chemotherapy shortly before her demise was carelessly whitewashed and destroyed by the Crafts museum, much to the intense horror and chagrin of former museum director and art historian, Jyotindra Jain and other intellectuals. Ganga Devi painted the chamber over a period of three to four months in her now renowned technique, covering almost all four walls from floor to ceiling. The work was dated to have been completed on 1/1/1990.

Retrieved from: https://thewire.in/culture/an-artists-lifework-painted-over-by-the-brushstrokes-of-bureaucracy

PART 4 WOMEN IN ART AND CRAFTS

> In claiming its diversity and hybridity as part of contemporary art, India not only acknowledges its rich pluralistic existence but also re-configures the definition of contemporary –
>
> Yashodhara Dalmia, (as cited in Marchand, 2012. para. 5).

4.1 – THE ARTS AND CRAFTS OF ARTISTS IN RURAL LANDS; REVIVING TRADITIONAL ARTS

As mentioned earlier in this paper, current scholarly discourse has embarked on a redefinition of the concept of Vernacular art, tribal art, folk art and crafts, minor art, etc. striving to provide the rich artistic tradition of rural India, its deserved place and recognition in contemporary art discourse. In the exhibition catalogue of one of the first shows in contemporary galleries of the type of art that portrays “colourful paintings representing gods and goddesses, animals and beautiful trees” (Marchand, 2012, p. para. 6); Ranjit Hoskote, cultural critic, states that this category of creative expression pertains to "the field of the third artistic production in contemporary India which is neither metropolitan nor rural, neither (post)modernist nor traditional" (as cited in Marchand, 2012. para. 6).

Vernacular, in the Contemporary, an exhibition held at the *Devi Art Foundation* in Gurgaon, in 2010/2011, and curated by Annapurna Garimella, may have provided the foundation stone for the reinterpretation of the work of these artists as valuable examples of the extension of "traditional visual languages to translate contemporary events" (Marchand, 2012, p. para. 8). Garimella states that the artists whose work is categorised as vernacular, notwithstanding, seek to interpret and reflect "global concerns" through their practice.

In this and following chapters, what I would specifically like to explore are the collaborative experiments and endeavours amongst social activists, intellectuals and artists as well as the recognition of cultural heritage and ownership; including so called main stream, urban artists alongside vernacular artists. I would like to examine not only the process and developments which have contributed to providing and acknowledging the deserving identity, recognition and intellectual value to vernacular art, but also highlight the social and political significance of such collaboration and inclusion. I would also like to address the issue of artistic identity and ownership as well as improved economic and social standing of the artists and their communities.

A look at Ruchira Goswani and Karubakee Nandi's paper on the property rights of women artists from India would be appropriate at this point. The paper refers directly to the cultural and economic rights of indigenous women artisan artists and communities of India; which have until relatively recently been largely disesteemed and ignored. (Goswani & Nandi, 2008) One of the notable instances

where cultural misappropriation was adequately sanctioned by law and thus came into international public media focus was when the U. S district law ruled in favour of the Amis Tribe in Taiwan. Even a cursory look at the Amis made it clear that they were the cultural owners of the music which made up the song: *Return to Innocence*, used by the German American band *Enigma* as the theme song for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics opening ceremony. As a result of the court ruling, *Enigma, Capitol-EMI Music* and *Virgin Records* were obliged to reach "an out of court settlement" (Goswani & Nandi, 2008, p. 257), as well as recognise and acknowledge the cultural heritage and contribution of the Amis people to the hit song.

Goswani and Nandi outline the intervention and awareness of the United Nations to the plight and cultural heritage and rights of indigenous people over the last twenty years, as well as the establishment of protective legislation. They also draw attention to the lack of implementation of policies and as such the failure to fulfil the cultural as well as economic responsibilities towards indigenous artists and communities; by paying them the appropriate monetary returns from the commercialization and distribution of their art. Just as Enigma in the first instance, before the court ruling; (as cited in Goswani and Nandi, 2008), made absolutely no mention of the Amis people, nor did they plan to share any of the huge profits after the misappropriation of their traditional rhythms and music; so in India, many of the women artists behind the exorbitantly rich industry and commercialization of 'Indian handicrafts' worldwide, receive little or no

recognition of their heritage, work or talent and paltry economic compensation. According to Goswani and Nandi,

> India´s labor-intensive handicrafts trade, basically a cottage industry, is dispersed widely-located mainly in rural areas-and is the largest employer in the unorganised labor sector. Behind the huge industry are millions of artisans who create the Indian handicrafts that are unique and immediately identifiable in the global market. (Goswani & Nandi, 2008, p. 259).

The situation is exacerbated by the standpoint of the Indian government which (as cited in Goswani and Nandi, 2009, p. 259) "refuses to recognise traditional artisan communities or custodians of traditional knowledge and folklore as 'indigenous' peoples." (Xaxa, 1999). Over the last twenty five years the United Nations has drawn global attention to "the issue of cultural and intellectual property rights of indigenous communities" (Goswani & Nandi, 2008, p. 261). According to Valsala G. Kutty, the Indian government has neither drawn up sufficient protective legislation nor does it enforce the recognition or compensation for artists and communities whose artistic traditions are exploited for commercial purposes. "[…] there is no special law prohibiting the exploitation of folklore of these communities without permission. […] As there is no law prohibiting the use of such folklore by outsiders, increasingly they are being used for commercial gain" (Kutty, 2002, p. 19).

Goswani and Nandi also state that apart from the dearth in policies that might "protect the cultural rights of traditional and indigenous communities" (Goswani & Nandi, 2008, p. 277), a generalized lack of understanding of the very patriarchal characteristics of the traditional and rural communities in India permits the exploitation of the cultural and artistic expressions of women. Within Indian communities, women's voices are silenced and their contributions are rendered invisible by the elderly male leaders who represent these rural communities. With very few exceptions, women's cultural expressions and contributions are neither recognised nor protected and are simply perceived as a source of revenue and employment and "a natural extension of their gendered roles" (Goswani & Nandi, 2008, p. 277). Goswani and Nandi further argue that should policies reinforcing intellectual property rights be enforced, in such "hierarchical and patriarchal" (Goswani & Nandi, 2008, p. 278) societies, women would still not benefit either economically or through recognition from them.

Jyotindra Jain, eminent Indian art historian, states that up until 1947, men were honoured with the title of supreme "creator or master", and although the nineteenth century saw a surge of representation of traditional art and crafts in public spaces, women were excluded from recognition, despite their obvious contributions, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). However, Jain does affirm that after independence *The National Awards for Craftspersons* was set up; some women did receive the award, although they were still not included in the major

colonial art and craft exhibitions of London, Glasgow and Paris, (as cited in Jain, 2005).

Despite the predicament outlined above, it would seem that at various points in history both government and pioneering visionaries have dedicated tangible effort and resources towards an attempt at establishing infrastructures and policies that could provide both the arts and their people with their deserving cultural, economic, artistic merit and intellectual property rights protection. It is most likely due to these specific efforts that Indian traditional arts and crafts are so easily recognised worldwide. On the other hand, the back lash of the resulting popularity from representation in a vast variety of media formats leading to easily identifiable iconography, is also perhaps one of the majors factors that has resulted in large scale demand for inexpensive reproductions; thus feeding the ongoing abuse of property rights through the flooding of markets by large scale, factory manufactured, cheap imitations.

4.1.1 KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAY (1903-1988)

There are some people who guide our lives, even though they enter them very briefly. For me, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay has played that role for a long time. […] If Gandhi inspired and led a political revolution, she inspired and led a cultural revolution (Steinem, 2017, p. Location 73).

A – Retrieved from: https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/kamaladevi-chattopadhyay-a-life-extraordinaire-5141302/

B – Retrieved from: https://caravanmagazine.in/essay/singular-woman-kamaladevi-chattopadhyay

(4.1.1) FIGURE - 83 A & B

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay as a younger woman and in later years.

Photographs courtesy of Delhi Crafts Council and Express Archive respectively.

At this point, one must touch, upon the figures of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) and, further ahead, Pupul Jayakar (1915-1997). Kamaladevi was arguably amongst the first and most ardent of Indian feminists.

According to Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, "Kamaladevi represented a generation of Indian women who were freedom fighters, in and out of jail, but also those who were responsible for freeing Indian women from the shackles of narrow social and economic boundaries" (as cited in Chatterjee, A. 2014, p. 3); (Chatterjee A. , 2014). Kamaladevi is also the figure who most learned Indians associate with the revival of Indian handicrafts. She did in fact become the "country's most well-known expert on carpets, puppets and its thousands of craft traditions, and nurtured the greater majority of the country's national institutions charged with the promotion of dance, drama, art, theatre, music and puppetry" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 4).

Dr Kapila Vatsyayan asserts that Kamaladevi's incessant struggle and commitment towards the recognition, at both national and international levels of the cultural and economic value of traditional art and handicrafts in India, was crucial to establishing the policies that have contributed to the relative elevation of this art form, as well as enabling at least some of the women artists involved a certain amount of recognition and credit for their contribution. Her outspoken championing of the arts of rural people succeeded in bringing about not only the Indian Cooperative movement, but also led to the formal recognition of traditional Indian handlooms and handicrafts in the institutions of the *All India Handicraft Board (AIHB)* and the *All India Handloom Board*. Kamaladevi was also quick in promoting the government to set up the institution of the *Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT),* (as cited in Chatterjee, A. 2014, p. 3 & 4). As

Gloria Steinem, the feminist journalist and political activist states in the foreword to Dubois and Lal's recently published book, "If Gandhi inspired and led a political revolution, she inspired and led a cultural revolution" (2017, p. Location 73)

These establishments contributed to the recognition and a certain amount of empowerment of rural artists, including women artists, while also ensuring acknowledgment of the socio cultural and economic value of the traditional arts and crafts forms; as representing both a national and cultural identity, as well as contributing to the economy. According to Kamaladevi's biographer, Jasleen Dhamija; "she saw crafts not in isolation, but as part of the rich fabric of our life involving all the creative expressions of a people" (Dhamija, 2008, p. 69).

According to Ritu Seth, Chairperson of Craft Revival Trust, – an online educational resource which documents "the intangible cultural heritage of the traditional arts, crafts and textiles and their practitioners and transmitters in South Asia" (1999, p. para.1); – Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's "pioneering work in the decades after independence rejuvenated and vitalized the crafts and craftspeople across India" (Sethi R. , 2013, p. para. 3). In 1996 she was awarded the highly prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award, one amongst many prizes she was to receive during her lifetime. Her name became "synonymous with Indian Crafts," (Nanda, 2002, p. 146). She is recognized for her pioneering efforts, dedicated to upholding the rights of rural artists, improving their socio-economic conditions, protecting their cultural and artistic heritage, as well as upgrading the overall

status of traditional arts and crafts in general. Kamaladevi's vision successfully altered the then prevailing, disvalued perception of traditional arts and crafts. She successfully challenged and reshaped the established norms and hierarchies alongside the customary attitudes and perceptions towards this form of cultural creativity and artistic expression.

Soon after independence, she worked together with experts from diverse fields and like-minded visionaries; together they set up numerous organizations, dedicated to the cause. Dhamija states that Kamaladevi stepped into the picture initially in 1952, (Dhamija, 2008). In actual fact, as we shall see shortly, evidence suggests that Kamaladevi was already playing an active role within the industry, long before 1952. She was appointed Chairperson of the *All India Handicrafts Board,* (AIHB), in the middle of the convulsing climate of post-independence and partition. The period was marked by conflict and mayhem, where whole villages and families had been ripped apart, and displaced.

Ritu Sethi asserts that Kamaladevi laid the ground work through organisations like the *Indian Cooperative movement,* (ICU), the *World Crafts Council* and the *Crafts Council of India,* (CCI), – largely women led and run, (Sethi R. , Craft Revivial Trust, 2013, p. para.5). – She thus pooled together a highly diverse group of people to forward her cause; art and culture experts, historians, professionals experienced in marketing and financing, alongside the artists themselves and their potential clients. "The furthering of the craft

movement, the process of revival and empowerment continued through her lifetime" (Sethi R. , 2013, p. para.5).

Kamaladevi's initial endeavour towards the promotion and marketing of handmade artefacts was aimed specifically at restoring a means of livelihood for women refugees, victims displaced by the independence struggle and partition of India and Pakistan. To that end, in 1948, soon after independence, a small handicraft store was established by the Indian Cooperation Union, (Chatterjee A. , 2014). This was followed by the Central Cottage Industries Emporium, which still continues today, now boasting several outlets all over India and perhaps one of the main sources for authentic, handmade, high quality Indian artefacts.

The word 'Cottage' represented the aspirations that Mahatma Gandhi had advocated for an independent India, of economic growth and opportunities based on the exploitation of local resources and talent. Kamaladevi was an active participant and instigator of several programmes which contributed to the craft renaissance, as Ashoke Chatterjee terms it, (Chatterjee A. , 2014). The organizations behind which she was a driving force, some of which have already been mentioned, included *The Cottage Industries Board*, the *Indian Cooperative Union* and the *All India Handicrafts and Handloom Board*. She was also behind the establishment of regional design centres, experimental marketing clinics in different regions, the *Crafts Council of India*, the *Crafts Museum* and the *National and States Awards*, which contributed to recognising the talents of many rural

women who had until then been completely anonymous. Thus, Kamaladevi succeeded in achieving both

> […] a national and global awareness of Indian craft and made it an integral part of our way of life, an inescapable element in the very idea of India. National and world demand for handmade quality from India has never flagged, even during years of economic recession. The visibility of its crafts and artisans gives India global leadership in the sector (Chatterjee A. , 2014, p. 12).

The *Paramparik Karigar Trust* was also founded with the support and influence of Kamaladevi in 1996. "It was the first registered body of craftspeople responsible for their own future […] with full decision making rights" (Sethi R. , 2013, p. para.6). Kamaladevi also set up research and documentation initiatives to record the diverse historical backgrounds of both art and artists, together with other relevant aspects of this particular heritage of rural India. All these organizations, hand in hand with many other initiatives that she pioneered, served to empower and reconstruct what had until then been an ailing, highly undervalued and invisible cultural heritage. As Ashok Chatterjee states, Kamaladevi was "conscious of India's huge advantage of living crafts and determined to transmit that heritage to the future" (Chatterjee A. , 2014, p. 11).

The eminent Indian economist and writer, Devaki Jain (1933), who worked closely with Kamaladevi, and whose labour has also been examined in the area of

the origins and development of feminist practice in India; states that Kamaladevi aimed at reminding and inspiring Indians into understanding the richness of their arts and crafts, which she saw as "representing an essentially Indian way of life" (Jain D. , 2015, p. para. 32). According to Devaki Jain, Kamaladevi firmly believed that through the practise and development of the arts and the Indian handicrafts industry, the people would be able to free themselves from the chains of the cast system and social classification. This would also contribute to a model of rural development and economic equality adhering to the progressive, Gandhian philosophy of social and economic growth; "she believed – as did many others in the early years after independence – that Indians would be happiest, and proudest, with the work of their own hands and culture" (Jain D. , 2015, p. para.32). Devaki Jain's husband, Lakshmi Chand Jain (1925-2010), a Gandhian economist worked closely with Kamaladevi, in many ways, especially in the effort to catalogue the different handicraft traditions around the country and establish fair and efficient methods of production and marketing, according to the needs of the artists (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017).

An immensely important part of Kamaladevi's legacy pertaining to her youth and the earlier years of her life, before she got involved in the development of the traditional arts industry of India has been largely forgotten or relegated to the side-lines of studies, in considering her work and contributions, and especially the women's question. I will therefore use this opportunity to do a more in-depth

study of Kamaladevi's background and highlight other aspects of her lifework and efforts which have not received the attention that is truly deserved.

The points to be examined here might be more appropriately studied in the section of this paper dedicated to the beginnings of feminism in India; however, I have considered it appropriate to initiate my study of Kamaladevi's life and work in this part of the paper that corresponds to the area of the renaissance of traditional Indian arts, for which she is currently best remembered; before highlighting the importance and impact of her earlier work as instrumental in shaping contemporary India, and feminism in India. Arguable, through her political, social and personal action, within just the first thirty to thirty five years of her life, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya had already broken the boundaries of her gender, caste and nation.

Ellen Carol DuBois describes Kamaladevi as,

> an extraordinary individual in many ways: for her equally high standing in the history of Indian women's and the Indian nationalist movements; by virtue of her broad contacts with both East and West, in the history of women's activism across national borders; because of her engagement with so many different issues, from birth control to refugee displacement; and finally because of the length of her career as a public activist, taking her through so many phases of colonial, national and international history from the 1920s through to the 1980. She was an international figure as any other than Gandhi in the Indian independence movement, yet she is largely

> forgotten around the world; and even in India her legacy has mainly been limited to her (albeit important) role in the revival of Indian handicrafts (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, pp. Locations 155 -162).

Kamaladevi was born on April 3, 1903 in Mangalore, – also Mangaluru, – the main port city of the state of Karnataka in south west India. She was the fourth and last child of Ananthiah Dhareshwar and Girjabai. An affluent liberal *Konkan Saraswat* Brahmin family; her father was a self-made man who retired as a collector and her mother came from a family of landowners who were amongst the richest in Karnataka (Brijbhushan, 1976). The family lived a relatively simple life, despite their wealth; however, they had a house full of helpers whose children's education was funded by Kamaladevi's father, as used to be and still is the custom amongst families of a certain affluence in India. They also enjoyed an endless stream of visiting relatives who would stay for extended periods of time, anywhere from two weeks up until six months.

In Kamaladevi's biography, Jamila Brijbhushan recounts details of her childhood, as a somewhat unconventional, rebellious little girl who was very close to her lenient father and often disobeying of her stricter mother. As a young child who shared her best moments of play exploring and wandering the large grounds of her home, alongside the servant children of the house, – despite being admonished continuously by her mother who expected her to remain indoors, not to mix with the servants' children; that is, to behave as was the correct manner for

a young *señorita* – Kamaladevi soon became aware of the distinct privileges as well as the restrictions that class differences brought about in society. As Brijbhushan states, "[…] Status and position meant nothing to her, especially when she saw that those who were much poorer than herself had freedom of movement which she so much cherished. She wanted equality rather than privilege", (Brijbhushan, 1976, p. 3).

Kamaladevi's father's untimely death when she was still quite young was to spell a great loss for her as well as Girjabai, her proud and independent mother, who had to start depending on a step son from her husband's previous marriage and other relatives for the family sustenance. Ananthiah Dhareshwar had failed to prepare a will before his demise, in which he could have allocated a specific part of the family assets to Girjabai. Although a generous settlement was arranged for Girjabai, she was to remain resentful of having to depend on others, rather than owning what was in all aspects rightfully hers; her own property and home. As such she soon began to spell out to her daughter that "the only real security for women was economic independence. […] economic security could be assured through education" (Brijbhushan, 1976, p. 4).

Another major influence on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was her maternal grandmother who lived with the family. Highly unusual for the times, in her youth Kamaladevi's grandmother had spent her spare moments between raising six daughters and a son reading voraciously, amassing a collection of books which eventually became large enough to convert into a library. Later on, even as an

older woman, her passion for books was undiminished and she was well-known for hosting book club like sessions of readings and discussions alongside animated conversations each evening with learned men and the occasional woman from diverse fields. She was an invaluable role model for Kamaladevi, as a person who was incessantly engrossed in her reading surrounded by piles of books in every corner, setting an example that her young granddaughter eagerly emulated.

> The Sanskrit verses hypnotised her […] and when the old lady was away from the room Kamaladevi would sit in the chair holding the largest book she could find, pretending to read it. […] Her grandmother seemed to her like a teacher, for it was she who usually read from the books while the others listened with great seriousness. Quite imperceptibly, the desire to become a teacher began to take shape in Kamaladevi's mind (Brijbhushan, 1976, pp. 4-5).

Meanwhile, her mother Girjabai was also a woman of letters, and a reader especially of social reform and political journals and newspapers such as *Kesari.* Jamila Brijbhushan states that as Kamaladevi grew, she began to read biographies and was particularly influenced by Annie Besant's autobiography (Brijbhushan, 1976, p. 7). The intellectual qualities that the most important women in her life possessed had unquestionably a great influence on Kamaladevi in her early years. She was not only to inherit her grandmother and mother's passion for reading but she also became highly interested in music and theatre, playing active and

important parts in the school plays and shows that were staged. As Jamila Brijbhushan states, Kamaladevi's childhood love for theatre and music were directly instrumental in the vital role she played in the renaissance and development of the traditional Indian theatre the industry (Brijbhushan, 1976).

After her father's death, Kamaladevi and her mother went to live with her maternal uncle. An important social reformer of the time, he was regularly visited by such notable figures as Annie Besant, Pandita Ramabai, and other luminaries, politicians and scholars of the time (Pal, 2017). She was introduced through her mother's will from the very beginning to the "leading lights of progressive Indian womanhood" […] and to the "international connections which early on anchored the Indian women's movement" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 162). As such, she personally met Pandita Ramabai and was 'blessed' as a ten year-old by Annie Besant (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017).

In accordance to the times, Kamaladevi was married very young, – some records put her age of marriage at eleven, others at twelve – she was widowed just as young, a couple of years later,[99] and suddenly "faced with the empty future of an Indian child widow" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 162). She was to become adamantly concerned with the dire need for social and

[99] There are discrepancies and no clear records in the different biographies that have been written to the exact dates and age when Kamaladevi first got married and was widowed. Records of her first marriage do not appear in Kamaladevi's memoirs either.

legal reform in the issues of child marriage and widowhood. She denounced the custom amongst Indian families of arranging extremely early marriages for their daughters. In her book titled, *The Awakening of Indian Women*, Kamaladevi presented her case stating,

> Over half the girls of India are still married under the age pf 15. But these figures hardly indicate the enormity of the damage. These reports pass silently over hundreds and thousands of young blossoming girls, wrecked for life physically and psychologically by forced premature motherhood… by all moral codes, it is rape but our social conscience is hard bound by dead old usages…. So the murders and rape go on, while we sit and gloat over the past glories of dead and gone Seetas [sic] and Savitris! (Hubel, 1993, p. 119).

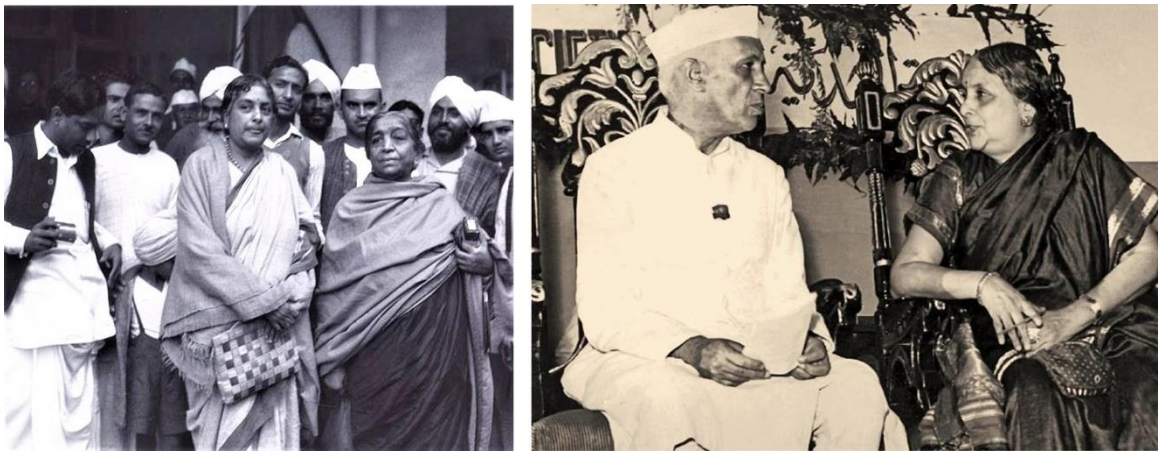
Jamila Brijbhushan asserts that in 1920, while nursing her sick elder sister, Kamaladevi met Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, a Bengali poet and writer who also happened to be Sarojini Naidu's brother. With her supportive family, and against the approval of much of the community, Kamaladevi was able to break away from the normal path mapped out for widows; she married Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, who was from another caste, in a civil ceremony. Some accounts state that Kamaladevi was twenty, others that she was sixteen, when she remarried Harindranath; like her, he also had a passion for amateur theatre and they shared much in common such as their interest in travelling, in politics and their

progressive values. The love marriage between Kamaladevi and Harindranath was seen as representing an ideal union; Jasleen Dhamija states that they were the "golden couple, representative of the emerging new India, working for freedom,… rediscovering the past and merging it into the emerging contemporary life, free of inhibiting social norms" (as cited in Chattopadhyay, Dubois, & Lal, 2017, Location 173). Kamaladevi's second husband, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya was from one of the most prominent families of the period. Sarojini Naidu, examined earlier in this study, was the oldest daughter of the family and was amongst the first leaders of the Indian women's movement. See: (4.1.1) FIGURE - 84 A & B

From the diverse biographical accounts, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya had a volatile and aggressive temperament, and the happy union was brief lasting. They had one son, but soon there were issues of infidelity, resulting in Kamaladevi once again defying tradition and creating uproar, when she divorced Harindranath in 1933, in-between periods of multiple imprisonment on civil disobedience charges, (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017); (Devenish, 2015). Divorces were highly frowned upon even amongst the more progressive circles and the Chattopadhyaya family were especially displeased, going to significant lengths to discredit her (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017).

During this period, Kamaladevi also met Margaret Cousins, – who she affectionately called, *Gretta*. Margaret Cousins was to play a major and highly influential role in shaping Kamaladevi's ambitions into serving the cause of women. Cousins encouraged her to run for elective office in the province of

Madras as the first woman to do so, which she lost by a narrow margin (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017). As such, Kamaladevi began her public life in activism, beginning first in the Indian nationalist youth movement and then continuing in the women's movement.



(4.1.1) FIGURE - 84 A & B

A – Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay on the left with Sarojini Naidu, at the beginning of the S*alt march* or *Salt satyagraha* protest, or possibly the *Simla Conference* (c. 1930). Photograph courtesy of: Press Information Bureau India & Gandhi Heritage Portal. Retrieved from: https://www.thebetterindia.com/111930/the-chowpatty-satyagraha/
Also accessible from: https://theprint.in/pageturner/afterword/kamaladevi-chattopadhyay-the-freedom-fighter-feminist-that-india-forgot-about/46710/

B – Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, (n.d.). Photograph courtesy of: Delhi Crafts Council and Devaki Jain, Arpana Basu and Kapila Vatsyayan from the exhibition *Kamaladevi and the making of Modern India*, (April 2016).
Retrieved from: https://www.newskarnataka.com/features/legend-from-ktaka-kamaladevi-chattopadhyay-extraordinary-woman-extraordinary-life

While still in her twenties, Kamaladevi had already become one of the founding members of the previously mentioned, *All India Woman's Conference (AIWC)*; she also became a member of the *All India Congress Committee (AICC)* which was the Indian National Congress decision-making body. The AIWC was primarily involved in social reform activities and Margaret Cousins put Kamaladevi in charge of the AIWC as chief organiser. Five years after its inception, under Kamaladevi's leadership, the AIWC portfolio expanded "to undertake reform of the full range of invidious social practices affecting women, making AIWC the largest and most influential Indian women's organisation through the rest of the nationalist pre-independence period" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 196).

The AIWC became the central organisation to negotiate the reform legislation of the practices of purdah, child marriage, widowhood and prostitution; thus, effectively transferring the responsibility for social reform and change from the British 'saviours' to Indian women. This was specifically true following the controversy from the 1929 publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, the infamous attack on gender practices and customs in India, – examined previously in this study. As Mrinalini Sinha outlines, Indian women activists developed the *Sarda Act*,[100] through which sophisticated campaign strategies led to the successful

[100] It is also known as the Sharda Act, after its sponsor Rai Sahib Harbilas Sarda.

passing of the bill to outlaw child marriage; a bill which also became the only legislation to date, on family and marriage, that is law across religions (Sinha M. , 2006).

As seen earlier in this study, the role played by the AIWC in the passing of the *Sarda Act* was determining in eliminating the apparent justification for British rule, which in turn also provided a major factor for the case of independence and self-rule. Moreover, it served to demonstrate that not only did Indian women possess the capacity to identify and alter damaging domestic practices that impeded progress, advancement of the nation and freedom, but that they were wholly within their rights to deal with issues that affected them directly as Indian citizens and women of India, (Sinha M. , 2006).

In 1929, Kamaladevi also attended a number of conferences in Europe where she met international figures like Jane Addams, the United States pacifist social reformer and the Egyptian nationalist feminist Huda Shaarawi. Undoubtedly, these encounters were significant and contributed in the shaping of Kamaladevi's persona as a political activist. Approximately ten years after this initial trip, Kamaladevi was to go on another world trip where she challenged the *International Alliance of Women* in Geneva for ignoring colonial issues and struggles. She also met people like Eleanor Roosevelt and Margaret Sanger, the pioneer birth control activist and showed her sympathy with the African American civil rights struggles; staying exclusively with African American families during her travels in the American South. The experiences and encounters on her

numerous trips were undoubtedly instrumental in shaping her vision and action, as described in many of her publications (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017).

Kamaladevi was directly involved in the processes that converted women into active players in the forefront of the nationalist struggle. She was one of the most prominent figures in promoting the inclusion of women, as vital, indispensable and major players in Gandhi's nationalist movement. Amongst the most well-known examples of this is the case when Kamaladevi stood up to Gandhi to contradict his position regarding the participation of women in the famous Salt march in 1930. As a 27 year-old she convinced Gandhi that women had to be allowed to participate in the historic *Satyagraha* salt march; which she assured him, would go down in history. The famous march was to be the first step to the massive participation of women in Gandhian nationalism, through their active presence, form then onwards, in endless acts of civil disobedience and protest marches, thereafter.[101] Kamaladevi recalled her conversation with Gandhi thus,

> I had built up a whole edifice of hopes involving women in this great adventure…. My conversation with Gandhiji was fairly brief … 'The

[101] For further details, see lecture: *Feminism and the Indian National Movement: Kamaladevi*. A discussion with Gloria Steinem, Ruchira Gupta and Ellen DuBois, moderated by Vishakha N. Desai; https://asiasociety.org/new-york/events/feminism-and-indian-national-movement-kamaladevi

> significance of a non violent struggle is that the weakest can take an equal part with the strongest and share in the triumph as you have already said. This struggle is ideally suited for [women.]' He readily conceded…. I felt I had won the world (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 208).

The march which ended in Dandi, a coastal village in Gujarat, the place chosen to formally break the salt laws, lasted 24 days; starting on March 12, and finishing on April 6, 1930. It gained international attention and as Geraldine Forbes highlights, coincided with the anniversary of the Amritsar massacre.[102] The front line of seven people chosen to be the first to step onto the beach and light the fire to boil the sea water to separate the salt included two women, one of whom was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. Kamaladevi writes of that day,

> […] this was their [women's] first appearance in any modern militant campaign and I could hardly supress my excitement at the enormity of the occasion and my own good fortune to be amongst the first […] It seemed such a stupendous moment in my life, in the life of the women of my country (Chattopadhyay K. , 1986, p. 153).

[102] For the most recent information on the Amritsar Massacre, see: Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre, by Kim Wagner (Yale University Press, 2019).

Following the salt march, Kamaladevi became one of the first women to spend time in and out of British prisons, arrested for civil disobedience over the next five years. Her experiences, especially during her second term in prison in 1932, deepened her understanding of the conditions of the most disadvantaged women, thus cementing her lifelong dedication to the cause of peasant and working class women. Annie Devenish states that this period brought about

> […] one of her most profound moments of political awakening […] during this period […] she first came into contact with a group of very poor rural women satyagrahis from Karnataka. This was her first real contact across class and caste boundaries, and access to this new social world gave her insight into the experiences of poverty and hunger faced by these communities of women. Talking to these women about the hardships they faced in their daily lives enabled Kamaladevi to critically interrogate some of the notions of freedom that had underpinned her involvement in the nationalist movement and the Indian women's movement up until that moment, helping her to see the limits of a purely political conception of freedom, and drawing her attention, instead, to the economic basis of gender and class oppression (Devenish, 2017, pp. Location 5400-5412).

Unfortunately, as in the case of Pandita Ramabai, it would seem that despite the increasing growth of research into Indian history in general, and women's history in particular, Kamaladevi's legacy has been largely ignored and the

recognition of her immense contributions seems to be limited to the area of the handicrafts industry, as stated earlier. Yet, as stated by Vinay Lal, Kamaladevi was for almost three decades after India's independence "India's representative to much of the Global South" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 464). Vinay Lal further asserts that during most of the three decades after independence, Kamaladevi was amongst the most prominent modern Indian women to appear in documentations and publications on India, at the time. Sadly, as Lal asserts "the evidence of the neglect from which she has suffered in recent decades is overwhelming" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 472).

Lal provides the example of the relatively recent 2014 publication of what is an evidently ambitious research project by an expert historian, documenting the history of modern India. [103] The publication includes a focus on women's history but is highly conspicuous in the lack of any mention of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017). Sakuntala Narasimhan's states in her biography that Kamaladevi's book, *Tribalism in India*, published in 1978, which offers a rich and in-depth study into the origins, customs, ceremonies and diverse aspects of the indigenous populations of India, has yet to be borrowed out for the first time from the New Delhi library of the *Indian Council for*

[103] See: A History of Modern India; (Banerjee-Dube, 2015).

Cultural Research (ICCR) (Narasimhan S. , 1999, p. 213). This is a fact, despite the general discontent amongst these populations, rising militant insurgency and armed conflict; described as the 'The Naxalite problem' and repeatedly as one of India's "greatest internal threats", quoting the former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.[104]

In putting together the seminal book, A *Passionate Life: Writings by and on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay,* Vinay Lal and Ellen Carol DuBois recount the fortuitous aspect of meeting with people along the way who were friends or acquaintances of Kamaladevi, clearly demonstrating that "in the aftermath of independence, and well into the 1970s, she had an inescapable presence in Indian public life and she must have touched thousands of lives […] as a stalwart of both the freedom movement and the women's movement" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 486). Internationally, Kamaladevi had sought to create transnational solidarities with feminist movements and colonial activists in her travels to Berlin, Prague and Frankfurt in meetings she attended of international women's and anti-colonial organisations. Through these meetings, she was able to

[104] See: A History of Misplaced Development Milestones: A Case of Adivasi Women of Central India, by Rajat Shubhro Mukherjee (2015); Framing the tribal: ethnic violence in Northeast India, by Ashild Kolas, (Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway, 2015); https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1062050

understand common factors of colonization and colonised people and as Lal suggests, she was instrumental in anticipating the Global South through her travels and in positioning

> India to take a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement and in crafting the call, signified preeminently by the Bandung Declaration of 1956, for a non-racial world order based fundamentally on ideas of ecumenism, equality, and justice. The revival of connections with Asia and Africa served as a reminder of the fact that one of colonialism's most insidious effects was to eviscerate even the memories of the cultural and intellectual networks that in the past had linked various communities in these two continents (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 582).

Kamaladevi's memoirs, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces* show with absolute clarity how vehemently opposed she was to the partition of India after independence. She appealed to Gandhi not to concede, overtly predicting the resulting mayhem and tragedy for generations to come; time has more than validated her arguments. Kamaladevi recounts the defining moments of 1947 in her memoires thus:

> Partitioning of a colony was the price extracted by ruling Britain as the price of 'freedom' It has been a normal pattern of British diplomacy. Everywhere this has left an unending trail of strife, violence despair, as in

Ireland, Palestine. It were as though the entire region is caught in the coils of a vicious ghost, from which it is never able to extricate itself.

True we swore we did not accept the two nation theory, nevertheless we acted on that palpable fallacy. After having lived together for centuries, […] I could not but feel that Gandhiji could have snipped this during the early negotiations. Why didn't he' In a kind of mental turmoil I went to Gandhiji […] I feared I might break down 'Why did you let it happen,' I almost cried out […] Even now if you refuse to accept this monstrous decision the people will support you. You have only to give the word,' I went on breathlessly […] Though appeals to Gandhiji seemed futile, some amongst us made desperate attempts The Socialists stubbornly insisted on active opposition by launching a country wide opposition This however was firmly negativated by Gandhiji. We stressed that partition was not only a deep emotional atrocity that would lacerate the people for generations, it had no rationale either. The very fact that more Muslims were to stay back in what the Muslim League termed 'Hindu India, cut at the very roots of this fantasy. No wonder Gandhiji had intuitively cried out in quiet agony *I sec only darkness before me now […] The final endorsement of this agreement was to be by the All India

Congress Committee Gandhiji made a special appeal to the Socialists not to raise any opposition m the Session, […] I recoiled at the implication of this message. When the proposition was put to the vote, I could not even

> reconcile myself to remain neutral. Something within me warned me that if I did not record what my conscience could not reconcile itself to an act which I felt was fundamentally wrong and if I did not record my belief I would live with a sense of a heinous guilt So I raised my hand in opposition, (Chattopadhyay K. , 1986, pp. 303-305).

Kamaladevi had been an active participant as a member of the *Congress Working Committee*, – the executive body of the premier nationalist organisation, – in the negotiation for independence, figuring amongst the main players alongside Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayaprakash Narayan. As is clear from her memoirs, she would never reconcile herself with the partition of India to create a separate nation-state for Muslim Indians; even as this possibility became an increasingly likely reality. It would appear that when the moment to finally vote for, or against the partition of India arrived, Gandhi had requested the members of the *All Indian Congress Committee* to not raise opposition as he feared the jeopardising of independence. Predicting the terrible effects and the human toil of partition, Kamaladevi had personally begged Gandhi to reject what she termed as the "monstrous decision" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, p. Location 616). It would seem that Kamaladevi's decision to reject Gandhi's acquiescence to partition also meant the end of Kamaladevi's political involvement; as she states, to "raise my hand in opposition. With that I broke my

link with this political life. For by now a realisation had been growing in me that this was not my vocation" (Chattopadhyay K. , 1986, p. 305).

However, Annie Devenish raises a question as to what the possible true factors behind Kamaladevi's decision to withdraw from politics might have been. Facts which further demonstrate the quality of her struggle and resistance. "As Freedom came, service was replaced by struggle for positions of power…To me the beacon lay elsewhere, in the side lanes of creative and constructive work" (as cited in Devenish, 2015, p. 113).

Kamaladevi's numerous actions and role as a highly active political figure before independence which continued all through the period, leading up to the very day of independence, belie her statements as to the reasons for her withdrawal from politics being a difference in the turn in politics after independence. As Annie Devenish asserts, "Her active participation within the nationalist movement and her involvement as a founding member of the Congress Socialist Party defined her as someone who was intensely interested in the political sphere and was trying to carve out a space as a political actor" (Devenish, 2015, p. 113).

Additionally, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was known to have been one of the most willing, if not the only one amongst the activists to attempt to stand up and subtly challenge the position of the powerful male leaders including Gandhi and Nehru, when necessary. There is the instance when Nehru suggested that women's organisations were being 'superficial' in their analysis of the problems

besetting women. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya is known to have asked him to try to be more empathetic, highlighting to him that it was doubtful that he was truly able to understand or appreciate the difficulties of the social prejudice that women were battling in their lives and in the societies that they were attempting to reshape. Geraldine Forbes states that she made it clear to Nehru that, "the fight against the rigid codes of society was more difficult and less glamourous that any political struggle" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 533).

The reason for Kamaladevi's distancing from politics would seem to be actually related to Kamaladevi's personal life, and how Gandhi reacted to this, which, according to her more recent biographer Reena Nanda, compromised her political future in the Congress Party (as cited in Devenish, 2015). For all her untiring labour and efforts; as a twice divorced and once widowed woman, Kamaladevi did not fulfill the *ideal Indian woman* image that was sought for projection to the world. In fact, as Nanda indicates, as far back as 1936, Kamaladevi had begun to be marginalised from key appointments as "Gandhiji, concerned that her divorce made her [sic] unsuitable moral role model, was influential in blocking her appointment to the Executive of the Congress" (as cited in Devenish, 2015, p. 113). However, what can be clearly evidenced here is that the patriarchal notions that determined what was socially acceptable and respectable of a woman functioned as effective barriers, constraints to the freedom and choices for someone like Kamaladevi, who, in her private life, rebelled against the social conventions of the period.

After independence, the final *Constitution of India*, adapted in 1949, provided women with absolute equality, abolishing social restrictions, and as Geraldine Forbes states, "The new legal codes […] and the new bureaucratic structures included institutions designed to improve women's status" (Forbes G. , 1982, p. 532). As we have already seen, Kamaladevi herself was terribly disillusioned with the partition of India. This, alongside the reasons outlined earlier, led to her complete withdrawal from public political involvement; instead, she dedicated her efforts to the resettlement of the thousands of refugees, victims trapped in the chaos of displacement from partition. Lakshmi Chand Jain (1925-2010), who later married the economist, Devaki Jain, was responsible for the running of the Kingsway refugee camp in North Delhi. He used his experience of establishing cooperative societies in the camps and worked closely with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, using similar structures and work models to propel the handicrafts industry later on.

As stated previously, Kamaladevi was arguably amongst the first and most ardent of Indian feminists. However, within the innumerable political and historical contexts in which Kamaladevi was involved, she had what can only be described as an uneasy relationship with the word feminism. Right from the 1920s and through the 1980s, Kamaladevi was involved in activities that were clearly feminist; evident in her work and profound commitment to "naming, challenging, and finding ways to uproot women's subordination" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 240). Yet, Kamaladevi was insistent, throughout her life, on not being labelled a

feminist. As Ellen Carol DuBois asserts, she was specifically against what she perceived as the "sex antagonism" of the war years; as such, "she was both summoning feminism and disavowing it" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 240).

The issue that Kamaladevi had with being called a feminist is worth exploring simply because the concept of feminism continues to cause controversy and misunderstanding in India today. Many women whose agendas within their individual specialities demonstrate clearly feminist tendencies continue to shy away from being called feminists. Kamaladevi is understood as having been a feminist, just as many of the other women examined in this study; even while she herself and they did not, or do not see themselves in that light. In the case of Kamaladevi, as in the case of other women considered here, "doing speaks louder than words", to borrow a phrase Kamaladevi herself was fond of stating, (as cited in DuBois, 2017, Location 240). Kamaladevi in particular, without exception, was an advocate for actions that are categorised as feminist, as we understand the term today. She spoke and worked untiringly for "independent women's organizations, equal political rights, equal pay for equal work, reform in marriage, divorce and inheritance laws, even birth control and *sex freedom*" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 240).

Devaki Jain highlights that Kamaladevi understood clearly and made the connection between the personal and political; using the experiences and sufferings of her own life caused by her situation of child widow and divorced woman, as representative of the condition of many women in general (as cited in

DuBois, 2017). She suffered political discrimination because of her condition of being widowed, remarried and divorced; even from her beloved Gandhi, as we have seen previously. Despite that, she had no reservations with addressing him directly and openly challenging his opinions, if she felt appropriate. She was very vocal in her criticism of men's agendas which evidenced strategies that maintained women *enslaved* and dependent.

Ellen Carol DuBois asserts that the disavowal with feminism amongst Indian women and Kamaladevi in particular was complex and involved several facets (DuBois, 2017). Amongst these, significant importance lay in the geopolitical and historical aspects of the movement across continents. A part of the disagreement might also have arisen from the differences in social and political contexts of activism as well as from western feminists advocations for "greater freedom for women or what has been termed as the *equality versus difference debate*" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 325). As such, an examination of Kamaladevi's complex relationship to feminism also helps shed light on the historical and diverse geopolitical contexts that have been instrumental in shaping the context of feminism around the world.

Kamaladevi's extended career in political engagement which, according to DuBois, covered "virtually the entire period between feminism's first flourishing and its revival in the late 1960s" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 250), added to the nationalist and internationalist character of her discourse can contribute to understanding the concepts that have shaped the quest for women's liberation and

greater freedom. DuBois asserts that amongst other reasons, Kamaladevi's "disavowal with the term *feminism* is situated with respect to her anti-imperial politics" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 250).

Many non-western women activists, both past and present, consider feminism to be a movement aimed at addressing western challenges, one that is not applicable to the context of the condition and challenges faced by women in India and the rest of Asia. Kamaladevi also considered that the instruments of women's oppression in India had greater social rather than political factors. Incidentally, as it so happens, "Kamaladevi lived long enough to see a revival of global feminism in which the tension between social and political approaches which troubled her began to be addressed and resolved" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 261).

For anti-imperialist, Indian nationalists such as Kamaladevi, there was first and foremost the dire necessity to shield the massive movement and participation of women, on behalf of independence, from any possible association with the British. During the nationalist movement, many women activists, including Kamaladevi and Sarojini Naidu, – and particularly after the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, – strove to transfer the blame for the condition of Indian women away from men in general, and particularly from Indian men, exclusively to British imperialism and government policies. DuBois highlights that

> Kamaladevi repeatedly asserted that Indian men would not oppose women once women "awakened" because they would recognize that the Indian women's movement was part of the larger project of freeing India from foreign occupation and bringing it into conjunction with the larger modern world (as cited in DuBois, 2017, Location 270).

She was of course mistaken in her faith as regards *men* and society or their capacity to leave behind patriarchal norms. DuBois as well as Chaudhuri highlight that Sarojini Naidu, – who has ever since been repeatedly quoted by Indian women, – famously declared in the 1930 AIWC,

> I am not a feminist. To be a feminist is to acknowledge that one's life has been repressed. The demand for granting preferential treatment to women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been in Council and in the fields of battle… (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2004, p. xx); (as cited in DuBois, 2017, Location 270).

As we can see, Sarojini Naidu, like many Indian women, considered that feminism was an admission of the inferiority of women, a situation which they considered as not applicable to the Indian context; bearing in mind India's *glorious ancient traditions*, as well as what was misperceived as support from Indian men, during the nationalist movement. Similarly, Begum Shah Nawaz, who

was the main Muslim representative at the time in the AIWC also stated: "There is no such thing as a feminist movement in my country" (as cited in DuBois, 2017, Location 270).

The issue of feminist disavowal continues to plague India, as evidenced by declarations as relatively recent as 1990, by Madhu Kishwar, – the founder and editor of *Manushi*, a bimonthly journal on women and society whose statements have been cited earlier in this study – where she firmly asserts, "I do not call myself a feminist […]; I refuse to be labelled a feminist" (Kishwar, 2004, p. 26). Arpana Basu suggests that the connection between the women's movement and the nationalist movement in India shaped the main difference in concepts from Western feminism. "As the nationalist movement gained momentum, the goal of independence became the only concern for both men and women" (as cited in Chaudhuri, 2004, p. xxi).

Additionally, in the case of Kamaladevi, she was also amongst those who noted and felt the loss of appeal that feminism suffered after World War I; as a result of the movement's apparent loss of capacity to exert influence, even while the movements of socialism, pacifism and labour reforms continued to apply lessons and politics based on the concept of feminism. DuBois asserts that the loss of appeal for feminism was not exclusive to Indian activists like Kamaladevi and Sarojini Naidu, whose agendas clearly strived to separate their activism from western dominance. Virginia Woolf wrote in 1938, "the old names we have seen are futile and false" (as cited in DuBois, 2017, Location 302). Comparable in

some ways to Sarojini Naidu's criticism, Mary Ritter Beard, the United States historian and a former suffragist also apparently "rejected the term as an historical distortion. […] she found the term *feminism* unacceptable because it focused exclusively on men's subjection of women and overlooked women's *active role in history"* (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 302).

In the Indian context, an important aspect that Kamaladevi often emphasised lay in the fact that Indian women did not have to struggle excessively to achieve political rights equal to men, especially when compared to the larger fight for national independence. As such, the political activism involving campaigns for voting rights and positions in office that were perceived as important achievements in Britain, did not hold the same place of pride in India. In analysing this situation, Ellen Carol DuBois asserts,

> Indian women's achievement of political rights not only preceded the full force of women's activism in reforming the social sphere but was turned largely into a tool for achieving social reform. When Kamaladevi counterpoised her superior interest in "the social" rather than "the political," she was both reflecting her limited belief in the capacity of politics-as-usual to address deep social problems, and her commitment to the massively unfinished work of reforming Indian society on behalf of women and their families (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 366).

L. C. Jain states that to say that Kamaladevi's death left a void that is difficult to fill would be an enormous understatement. L. C. Jain asserts of Kamaladevi,

> […] she spent a lifetime filling the voids around her. For herself she asked for nothing, she occupied little space. Kamaladevi had a sharp and scintillating intellect and a rare passion for the fine arts. But all her talents were for giving to society. At all times she was a *Karmayogi*[105] (Jain L. C., 1988, p. 6).

The activities that followed Indian independence have often been described as the second revolution, in reference to the economic and social transformation that took place. Kamaladevi dedicated all her energy post-independence towards securing the wellbeing, as much as that was possible, of the neediest of society. What is clear is that as a socialist activist, Kamaladevi was able to critically analyse women's social condition from historical perspectives and understand the forces leading to change that could be achieved over time. She applied this knowledge to projects of social reform, her most ambitious one being the creation of the town *Faridabad*, which shall be examined shortly.

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[105] Person who is absolutely selfless and free of any form of vice; working for the wellbeing of the majority, he or she places the needs of others above and before their own.

Perhaps the most tragic as well as the most challenging of the tasks that Kamaladevi set herself was the resettling of refugees generated by partition. She decided to direct her work through her knowledge of the healing power of agency, self-help and autonomy, for people who go through traumatic situations that are beyond their control; experiences that effectively leave them in the state of helpless victims. Although there were many volunteers providing relief aid in the refugee camps, Kamaladevi was concerned specifically about the future of the refugees and their means by which they could become independent and free from the need of help and handouts. As such, Kamaladevi set up the Indian Co-operative Union which provided the necessary infrastructure to aid refugees in rebuilding their own lives with agency.

In the Kingsway relief camp in Delhi where she first met Lakshmi Chand Jain, Kamaladevi met hundreds of landless agricultural workers. She initially proposed that the farmlands that had been left behind by the farmers who had been forced to migrate to Pakistan be allocated to the landless farmers for their use and settlements. Kamaladevi was once again terribly disillusioned to discover that "all the 'evacuee land' (as it was called) had already been allocated by the Government to big landlords, the *zamindars* who had migrated to India from Punjab and Sind" (Jain L. C., 1988, p. 7). She challenged how a socialist professing government is able to re-establish a *zamindari* system. Lakshmi Chand states that the issue of a social rehabilitation policy had not been contemplated before Kamaladevi raised

the point. Through the Co-operative Union, she was able to get endorsement for a rehabilitation policy that favoured the landless (Jain L. C., 1988).

One of Kamaladevi's exceptional and most important social labours of love is to be found in what has been called a "unique experiment in township building never before attempted or ever later replicated in India" (Sengupta S. , 2015, p. para. 1). Faridabad, on the outskirts of Delhi in the northern state of Haryana, used to be the ruins of a nondescript settlement, originally built in 1607 during the Mughal era. After partition, most of the thousands of refugees who arrived in Delhi were housed in temporary camping facilities with no clear prospects of permanent rehabilitation on the horizon. Amidst the dire circumstances of providing food and shelter for thousands and thousands of partition victims, Kamaladevi liaised with Lakshmi Chand Jain and Sudhir Ghosh, – a Cambridge educated lawyer, diplomat, writer and Gandhian politician – and Dr Rajendra Prasad, – the first President of independent India – to organise the building of a complex that would house 50,000 refugees, and one which they themselves would participate in constructing. Through the Co-operative Union, the complex would take the form of a town to provide housing, facilities as well as small industrial units (Jain L. C., 1988) (Sengupta S. , 2015).

Records indicate that government engineers were sceptical about the viability of the project, disagreeing that a group of refugees who were mostly shopkeepers and traders would be capable of putting their hands to masonry, and carpentry as required, in order to successfully build a township. However,

Kamaladevi, alongside Mridula Sarabhai, – activist and friend of Nehru – managed to persuade the government to entrust the building of the resettlement township to the refugees themselves rather than contractors. Jawaharlal Nehru inspected the site of Faridabad and gave Kamaladevi and her team the go ahead, despite contractors' and engineers' protests. As a result of this experiment, the population of 50,000 refugees not only built themselves new homes, but acquired a whole new set of skills with which to earn a living (Jain L. C., 1988). Sengupta asserts that

> The refugees did not disappoint Kamaladevi. Having been organized in labour groups of 15 to 50 workers, they laid roads, erected houses; build a hospital and school and soon a fully-fledged township sprung up around small industrial units for which the residents organized their own infrastructural inputs. Kamala, Sudhir and Laxmi lead [sic] from the front. They were always at hand arranging government funds, loans, advice guidance and resolving disputes. Refugees ran their own transport service, health centre and community recreational activities. They named the hospital after Badshah Khan (frontier Gandhi) which we today know as BK Hospital (Sengupta S. , 2015, p. para. 9).

The entire town took a mere three years to build. The first power plant to supply electricity to Faridabad was an old 6000 KW German war plant that had been lying in 180 crates at the Calcutta docks for the last two years, waiting for

repatriation. Apparently, the Central Electricity commission had attempted, unsuccessfully, to trade the plant to various state governments, but were met with no buyers for what was an old rundown second-hand plant. The Faridabad town builders bought the plant. An engineer who had been an operator of the plant was tracked down, missing parts were replaced and the plant was reassembled without any working drawings. "With electricity available, Bata started a shoe factory, others followed and Faridabad was on its way" (Sengupta S. , 2015, p. para. 11). A report written in December 1951 by the inspector N. Saigal, on behalf of the Co-operative Societies to the Governor of Punjab stated

> I was very impressed with the work being done at Faridabad. A township has been built there by displaced persons themselves […]. What was previously just waste land has been converted into a thriving colony. Not only has this been a tremendous achievement in itself, but it has been a sort of pilot scheme showing the way in which the country can be developed (as cited in Sengupta S., 2015, para. 10).

As Sengupta declares, "It is not always that one woman's zeal makes a city" (Sengupta S. , 2015, p. para. 12). Lakshmi Chand states that "Faridabad is another monument to Kamaladevi's foresight and unerring capacity to reconcile practice with ideology.

However, Chand laments that the story was not fortunate throughout. Kamaladevi drew inspiration from the success of China's industrial co-operatives,

popularly known as *induscos*; in order to develop a network of twenty odd co-operative industrial businesses, as part of the rehabilitation programme to ensure the future prosperity of the inhabitants of Faridabad. Workers who were already immersed in activities of production were trained in business management and the principles of co-operative business strategies from a perspective of both members and owners of their enterprises. Kamaladevi's initiative was brought to a halt just when the workers were ready to formally take charge of the enterprises. The project was stopped by the government with arguments that penniless workers were not to be trusted with the ownership and running of factories in which significant government investment had been made. In fact, according to Lakshmi Chand, each factory had cost the government little more than 200,000 Indian Rupees (two Lakh Rupees); equivalent to approximately 2,500 Euros, at today's exchange rate (Jain L. C., 1988). Chand further laments that Kamaladevi was forced to throw in the towel when

> […] even Nehru could not make the Government change its rigid colonial approach towards co-operatives; and the factories were auctioned away to private enterprise. This was a shattering blow to a social dream from which Kamaladevi never recovered. The success of the worker-owned industries would have blazed a new trail and influenced the emerging industrial structure in the country (Jain L. C., 1988, p. 7).

In her later years, Kamaladevi gradually became less disenchanted with what she had previously perceived as the failings of the concept of feminism, especially as she started working closely with her *protégé*, Devaki Jain, Laksmi Chand's wife. When she was in her early seventies, Devaki Jain approached Kamaladevi for her help in framing what would be India's contribution to the 1973 UN Year of the Woman event. The occasion would go on to mark a new era and "re-ignite global feminism" (DuBois, 2017, p. Location 409).

Kamaladevi herself would go on to express her disillusion post-independence, she strongly criticised the Indian society for its "post-independence complacency and democratic passivity" (as cited in DuBois, 2017, Location 409). She was particularly critical about what she deemed the *tragic* situation of women. She lamented that women "now had the vote, a most powerful weapon, […] and several legal rights. But of what avail, for, they were hardly aware of their power and potential strength" (Chattopadhyay K. , 1975, p. 33). She was fiercely critical of the fact that the millions of people who had fought in what she called *the great freedom battle* had been abandoned, were ignored and left to their own devices by the *new rulers* who "were content with a tidy income and a smug abode" (Chattopadhyay K. , 1975, p. 33).

Kamaladevi insisted that to accomplish social change, the state could not be relied on, it was the effort of the masses and non-state organisations alone that could provoke significant social progress; as such, she criticized the fact that every issue ended up being *politicised.* In talking about women leaders,

Kamaladevi was especially critical of what she considered to be their willingness to wallow in complacency and amnesia. She asserted that they were guilty of having

> […] settled in, though in new social grooves of power and position that independence had thrown up. They forged no links with the wide mass of women, who are only approached briefly at voting time to secure their ballot papers. So the common women at large remained and continue to remain to this day, quite ignorant of their precious rights or how to use them for their own or public advantage. Thus this human mass with its vast latent power which was once sought after and when harnessed moved the very earth, lies today stagnant and unused for social regeneration or reconstruction (Chattopadhyay K. , 1975, p. 33).

As Carol DuBois and Vinay Lal state, Kamaladevi's "views on women's equality continue to resonate in our times. […] Throughout her life, […] she upheld with all the intellectual vigour and emotional force at her command the idea of the dignity of every human life" (Chattopadhyay, DuBois, & Lal, 2017, pp. locations 4-11). Lakshmi Chand Jain also highlights Kamaladevi's unique and generous humanitarian vision with the following words.

> Till the end she fought for human rights. But for her, human rights were not an abstraction. To her, the concrete expression of human rights were the means for an autonomous, dignified and creative life–as land could provide

to tillers, factory to workers and yarn to the handloom weavers. She must be an inspiration, not for the successes that she was able to grasp, but for the pursuit of the unaccomplished tasks of India's second revolution to which she dedicated herself with all her heart and soul (Jain L. C., 1988, p. 8).

4.1.2 PUPUL JAYAKAR (1915-1997)

Pupul Jayakar (1915-1997), who also worked in conjunction with Kamaladevi, was perhaps the most significant and major player in the shaping of modern India's rural and traditional art heritage. On her death in March 1997, the introduction to her obituary in the UK newspaper *the Independent* by Kuldip Singh read: "Pupul Jayakar, better known as India's "cultural tsarina", presided colossus-like over the country's cultural scene for nearly 40 years, exposing its many facets overseas through expensive promotional extravaganzas in the 1970s and 1980s" (Singh K. , 1997, p. para.1). Richard H. Davis asserts that Pupul Jayakar sweepingly influenced the handloom and handicrafts industries of India.

> As an urban Indian enthusiast of Indian folk art and handicrafts who also had a cosmopolitan perspective, Jayakar envisioned a new set of productive and exchange relations for the women artists of Madhubani, where the villagers would produce a new type of art commodity for an urban audience, (Davis, 2008, p. 86).

During her childhood, Jayakar's father was closely connected to the then future prime minister's father, Motilal Nehru, an important leader in the leading Indian National Congress party. As a young adult, Jayakar developed a close friendship with Indira Gandhi, daughter of the then prime minister, Jawaharlal

Nehru. Indira Gandhi would go on to take over from her father to become one of the longest serving prime ministers of India, (Davis, 2008). Davis states that Nehru appointed Jayakar the task of studying the handloom sector of India and devising a strategy which would create a successful and profitable industry for the sector. One could safely assert that Jayakar's most significant influence was "in the transformation of Madhubani painting" (Davis, 2008, p. 84).

Madhubani is a district in Bihar, near the north eastern frontier of India and Nepal. Bihar is known to be amongst the most impoverished and underdeveloped parts of India. This despite the fact that in ancient India, Bihar was one of the major centres of economic development, learning and culture; the universities of *Nalanda* in the 5th century and *Vikramshila* in the 8th century attracted students and scholars from far and wide, (Monroe, 2002). Ganga Devi, – whose work and development we shall study further ahead – was one of India's most well-known vernacular artists from the Madhubani district.

In order to contextualize Pupul Jayakar's influence in revamping the handloom and handicrafts industry, which in turn led to the worldwide scholarly and commercial attention that propelled a select number of Mithila women artists and the paintings from the Madhubani district into the international lime light, we must cast our gaze back to the devastating Bihar earthquake of January 1934. On the cold sunny winter morning of January 15, 1934; the earth in North Bihar suddenly "shook violently for five full minutes" (Heinz, 2006, p. 7). The ground split open and spat out gushes of water and sand covering crop fields and pastures

far and wide. More than ten thousand people were killed, (as cited in Heinz, 2006).

The well-known Madhubani paintings of Mithila are a traditional form of painting dating back to ancient civilization, specifically carried out exclusively by women. Mithila, less commonly known as *Videha* or *Tirhut*, in fact encompasses not only Madhubani, but also the regions of *Darbhanga, Bhagalpur, Saharsa* and *Purnea* in North Bihar as well as parts of the *Terai* region of Nepal, (Rekha, 2010). The Mithila form of painting, traditionally done on floors and walls – although with Jayakar's introduction of paper to the region these are no longer the only supports used by the artists – was and is an integral part of the culture of these villages; expressing the spirituality of their lives which are rich with rites and rituals that celebrate and bless the multiple, auspicious passages in life.

Amongst all of these sacred passages, the Vedic sacred thread ceremony, – *yagyopavita* – and the marriage ceremony, – *vivaha* – represent the most important turning points in life, thus deserving of the most elaborate ceremonial paintings. The magnificent, highly intricate *kohabar ghar* paintings adorn the innermost intimate chambers of young brides. See: (4.1.2) FIGURE - 85 A & B. These are the most private areas of the household, off limits and completely hidden from the outside world and especially from male members of the community, accessible exclusively to the new bride and groom, at the appropriate moment. Carolyn Brown Heinz states that, "preparation of the chamber for its important role in the

wedding celebration involves all women of the household. […] Men play no role in this" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 80).

(4.1.2) FIGURE - 85 A & B

A & B – Ganga Devi, (c. 1980-90). Detail of *Kohabar ghar* painted during her 'cancer years' on the walls of the *Crafts Museum* in New Delhi. The work was whitewashed "in an act of *bureaucratic vandalism*" (Pisharoty, 2015, p. para. 1). Photographs courtesy of Jyotindra Jain.
Retrieved from: https://thewire.in/culture/an-artists-lifework-painted-over-by-the-brushstrokes-of-bureaucracy

Up until that fateful January of 1934, so far as can be seen from the records, the elaborate, centuries old painting rituals of the Madhubani region had been hidden from the outside world, unknown to all except the local communities, (Davis, 2008). The fatal earthquake on that cold January morning in 1934 led to the discovery of what has become the focus of study for academics and intellectuals worldwide, not only due to the scholarly interest in the rich culture behind these paintings created exclusively by women, "but also in a laudable

effort to bring new sources of income to an impoverished region of India and especially to its women" (Brown, 1996, p. 719) .

In 1934, William G. Archer was a British sub divisional officer in the Indian Civil service. Serendipitously, he was known to have been "active in left-wing student groups and an avid student of contemporary post-impressionist art at Cambridge in the late 1920s" (Davis, 2008, p. 82). He had arrived in India in 1931, with the intention of participating in the fair administration of Indian independence, while also involving himself actively in the lives of the local people in his constituents. His background led him to be specifically interested in the arts and culture of the area. After the earthquake, Archer was responsible for assessing the damage and establishing relief operations and plans.

Archer declares that, (as cited in Davis, 2008), although he had visited practically every part of the Madhubani region, there were significant areas that had been forbidden to his "official British male gaze" (Davis, 2008, p. 83). The earthquake, damaging, but not utterly destroying, laid bare all the magnificent, intricate and highly elaborate ceremonial paintings of the hidden sacred chambers. Quoting Archer's own words and description on seeing what was behind the previously hidden mud walls: "what I saw in the house of a *Maithil Brahmin* took my breath away. […] But now they stood exposed and with astonished eyes, I saw that the walls were covered with brilliantly painted murals" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 83). Davis also states that Archer described what he saw as reminding

him of the "The fanciful contortions of a Klee or Miro. […] Picasso in their savage forcefulness" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 83).

As Davis states, Archer saw the centuries old traditional painting of the rural women as absolutely and utterly modern. "I had seen nothing which so instinctively took for granted the assumptions of modern European art. With no attempt to render 'natural appearance' the paintings all sought 'to project a forceful idea of a subject rather than a factual record" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 83). Davis further states that Archer was so completely enthralled by the discovery of the wedding chamber paintings that he literally felt "a sense of connectedness across vastly different cultural worlds" (Davis, 2008, p. 83). Davis quotes Archer as stating:

> It gave me a new vision of Mithila. I felt myself modern. I liked modern art. They were medieval in attitude. I was stridently contemporary. They were products of pre-industrial India. I was a product of sophisticated England. Yet in these murals we somehow met….But whether deliberate or accidental, the art was there and it made us one. I had never felt myself so much a Maithil as on that day when faced with shattered walls, I saw the beauty on the mud" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 83).

The interest that the discovery of the first Madhubani paintings awakened in Archer led to him returning to India some years after the earthquake to further investigate his initial findings. He managed to build such a rapport with the local

people as to be able to get the help he needed to carry out an in-depth study of the paintings of the region. According to Davis, his relationship with the local people offered him an elevated status that gained him access into wedding chambers that are normally strictly inaccessible and forbidden to all men except the groom (Davis, 2008). As such, he was able to take photographs and was offered paper samples of visuals kept by the women painters for references. Years later, having finished his study and as a result of the privileged and exclusive access he had enjoyed, he was able to write up what was to be the first academic documentation of *Women's Mithila art* from the Bihar region of India. His article was published in the 1949 issue of Marg, a journal of Indian arts, established in 1946, (Davis, 2008); (Heinz, 2006).

Assuredly, as Davis asserts, the fact that Archer was the official present in the region during the earthquake of 1934 was key to the elevation and recognition of the cultural and artistic value of Mithila Art. Any other officer, without the discerning and cultivated eye of someone cultured in European, post-impressionist art, would most certainly have completely overlooked and dismissed the designs on the half standing interior walls of the mud structures, which had been exposed by the earthquake. Archer's encounter with those remains of the 1934 quake laid the ground work for the academic, intellectual and commercial interest in Madhubani art that has elevated it to its current standing.

This is where we get back to Pupul Jayakar's role in the transformation of Mithila Art. It was William G. Archer's article, published in the 1949 issue of

Marg that motivated Jayakar to first visit Madhubani, in 1956. Davis states that the 1950s were a period of particular hardship, in a region of India historically already stricken by poverty. As such, it would seem that when Jayakar first visited the area she was disappointed, only encountering blank walls covered with cheap calendars, instead of the highly lauded paintings that Archer had written about. She wrote in her notes, "The bleak dust of poverty had sapped away the will and the energy needed to ornament the home" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 85).

The periods of 1966 to 1967, were marked in Bihar by a severe drought often described as "the worst drought in living memory" (Brass, 1986, p. 246). This resulted in the declaration of famine in a region that was already notorious for being impoverished and low in production, as asserted by Brass. During this time, Pupul Jayakar, who was then the chair of the All Indian Handicrafts Board, decided to carry out an experimental scheme which she hoped would provide a means of income for the women artists of Madhubani as well as help with the government relief supplies and funds. Jayakar decided to provide them with paper and paint, on which they could do their traditional designs. These were collected by the Handicrafts Board, sold in Delhi and other cities, the proceeds of which were fed into the famine relief fund, (Davis, 2008).

As mentioned previously, Nehru had handed Pupul Jayakar, who was the chair of the All India Handicrafts Board the task of "developing India's crafts for both national prestige and local economic development", (Heinz, 2006, p. 18). Having read his publication in Marg, Jayakar corresponded with Archer asking

him for advice on how to find Mithila art. Although Jayakar did not initially have much luck during her visit to the region in the 1950s, the Bihar Famine marked a before and after for Mithila art as well as many of the women artists involved. As Carolyn B. Heinz states: "It is ironic that the aides-memoire, intended to convert a transitory art into a permanent ideal form, proved to be the vehicle for transcending traditional forms and individualizing artistic expression. Yet, this is what happened" (Heinz, 2006, p. 18).

In order to launch her experiment, Jayakar contracted Bhaskar Kulkarni, an artist from Bombay, to travel to Madhubani and assist the women in the process of acquiring the art of carrying out their painting on paper instead of walls. According to Susan S. Wadley, he was initially met with much resistance from the women who were highly conservative and traditional, and as such, extremely unwilling to work with "an elite urban male" (Wadley, 2014, p. 248).

However, amongst the women, there were many widows, the high cast *Brahmin* or *Kayastha* women were especially quick to see and seize the opportunity of finding a way out of the inauspicious chains of misery that widowhood spells. This is a society that outcasts and blames wives for the misfortunes that befall their menfolk, including death; notwithstanding that the men are often 20 years or more older than their wives, who are therefore more than likely to outlive them. Kulkarni worked hand in hand with government agencies to commercialize the art being produced, marketing it through government sponsored schemes such as the Arts emporiums, crafts shops and fairs

set up in Delhi mainly for this purpose. The railways minister also took an interest in the scheme and commissioned artists to produce their art in stations across the country. The prestigious *Akbar Hotel* in Delhi commissioned Mithila artists to decorate its coffee house with the increasingly recognisable paintings, (Wadley, 2014); (Davis, 2008).

As Davis states, "soon enough 'Madhubani paintings' were making their way off the mud walls and into the craft shops and galleries of Delhi and Bombay, and soon enough those of London and Toronto as well" (Davis, 2008, p. 85). It is now clear that the famine relief project which was started with the aim of providing women with the necessary material for them to create their art on less perishable and easily marketable supports, was highly beneficial, economically and in other nonspecific ways, both for the women themselves and for the region in general. To quote Pupul Jayakar's own poignantly eloquent impressions, during her visit to the area five months after the project had been underway:

> The landscape of Bihar through which I travelled was harsh, grey, cracked and desolate, and the heat remorseless. The dust and sun, the absence of water, and disappearance of green from the landscape left a monstrous tonal uniformity. The need for the worship of fertility and water, of tree and sap became understandable. Entering the villages of Madhubani, the landscape altered. There were a few dust heavy trees, a total absence of running water but the courtyard of the huts were freshly plastered and colours flowed in streams, from doorways. Old women, young women, girls, were bent over

> paper, painting with bamboo twigs and rags. The colours deep earth red, pink, yellow, black were laid out in little bowls on trays of *'sikki'* grass. In the paintings I had seen at the commencement of the project, the line of drawings was hesitant. Years of abstinence, of poverty, of dreary monotony had clogged the stream; eye and hand had to be freed of the years of sterility. But within five months the situation had changed. A sense of pride and joy had already permeated and transformed the women of Mithila. There was *visible a* simple dignity, a poise and a supreme self-assurance (as cited in Davis, 2008, pp. 85-86).

As stated earlier in this chapter, the positive response to the original project of painting on paper led Jayakar to involve numerous official, government bodies and collaborators, to help design more and more imaginative ways in which to not only empower the women and their art, foster the local economy but also to develop worldwide cultural recognition and national prestige, just as Nehru had envisioned. Evidence indicates that the transition to painting on paper had several repercussions on traditional Madhubani painting.

According to Caroline B. Heinz, William Archer had seen and acquired samples of Mithila art on paper, before Jayakar's intervention, which he took back to England. These he called *'aides-memoire'*, (Heinz, 2006, p. 16). These were normally samples of the most elaborate or important images, meant to be used as references by younger new wives, in between marriages. The *aides-memoire*

prevented immense cultural loss by ensuring that older women with talent and knowledge in the art would not die without passing on their gifts to the younger wives, who normally did not have much knowledge of this particular type of cultural practice and tradition, although they might have had their own. Heinz further states that "It is ironic that the aides-memoire, intended to convert a transitory art into a permanent ideal form, proved to be the vehicle for transcending traditional forms and individualizing artistic expression" (Heinz, 2006, pp. 17-18). Richard Davis also asserts that the move to painting on "marketable paper" (Davis, 2008, p. 87) instead of walls led to broad changes which encompassed materials and techniques of painting as well as the lifestyles and well-being of the women involved. Traditionally, Madhubani paintings were transient static pieces, seen only by the bride, the groom and other female participants in the ritualistic painting. The imagery, the themes and contents of the paintings were also limited to the wedding ceremonial purpose, as such, permanency was not an issue. The wall paintings rarely lasted longer than a few weeks. Painting on paper in order to market the art that was produced completely changed many aspects of the art that was produced after Jayakar's intervention.

Pupul Jayakar was able to use her elite status as an educated woman from a privileged background, with contacts and friendships amongst the highest placed Indian elite in order to "act as a mediator between the worlds of village women artisans and that of the urban art market" (Davis, 2008, p. 86). Just like Richard Davis, Carolyn B. Heinz asserts that Jayakar's original famine relief project which

started the move from painting on walls to paper "had enormous consequences for the region" (Heinz, 2006, p. 18). The paintings became a sought after product and as such, provided an income in areas which had always been amongst the most impoverished of the country. However, not only did they provide an income and development for the villages and women who previously had none, they raised the women's status and empowered them in the whole community. The paintings also shone a spotlight on this previously unknown part of India, drawing international attention from both scholars and travellers. They helped transform, in a relatively short space of time, a few of the women into international celebrities. Thus, they also opened the first debates and discourse regarding the classification of rural art, as primitive art, vernacular art or fine art. Heinz states:

> It has brought income into a deeply impoverished part of Bihar; it has provided a source of income to women who previously had none, especially women of high caste; it raised a cultural product of women in a highly patriarchal society to national and international esteem; it empowered women by giving widows a means of independence and wives a source of prestige to which husbands had to make adjustments; it drew foreigners with serious interests in the culture to a part of Bihar that had scarcely seen a European since the British departed; it detached the art from its dense ritual meanings by catering to the tastes of foreign buyers with limited curiosity about its significance and no means of learning it; and it turned a handful of women artists into international celebrities (Heinz, 2006, p. 18).

Davis clarifies that the new commercial purpose of the paintings meant that the women had to bear in mind factors that had been previously irrelevant. Now the paintings had to be durable and transportable. The fact that the surface of paper is smoother and easier to work on than plastered wall allowed for more control by the artists and as such much more intricate and detailed results. The audience to whom the paintings were aimed were no longer members of their own family and village, but an international, urban and distant elite, wholly outside their social circle. Traditional ritual Madhubani painting is carried out by groups of women; all of them contributing, depending on their skills, experience and age, either mixing colours, passing the required tools or in whatever other ways necessary; however, the actual compositions and elaboration of the paintings are done by the artists with the best skills and knowledge, who were recognised and admired by the other women.

As might be expected, the Madhubani paintings on paper are wholly individual compositions. Shortly after Pupul Jayakar set up the transition to painting on paper, the more experienced and skilled artists began to sign their paintings. Jayakar states that individual artists' work was "recognizable by style and character," (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 89). Davis further asserts that the paintings on paper were exempt from the restrictions and ties of the ceremonial wedding paintings, which naturally limited the artistic creativity and possibilities of individual and or personal reinvention. In this format, the artists "discovered

the freedom to explore and experiment with new themes, to push the Madhubani style in unforeseen directions, often to wonderful effect" (Davis, 2008, p. 89).

Furthermore, as would be expected, signing of their art alongside the introduction of painting on paper naturally brought about the first of new recognition and acclaims for the talents of specific women artists of the region. The fact that the women were now painting for a growing market demand rather than only for weddings, which at best were sporadic events, also meant that they dedicated longer periods of time on a regular basis to the production of art, and were thus able to develop their own individual identities and styles. Just as Carol Heinz's statement earlier, Richard Davis asserts that for these women artists, the signed pieces provided the first "step toward the discursive practices of art history" (Davis, 2008, p. 89).

In the late 1970s, a North American anthropologist, Raymond Owens, visited the Madhubani region; he was highly affected by the contrasts in the beauty of the art work being created and the desolate poverty of the region. Owens became active in promoting the paintings in the United States, forming a cooperative with the artists and exporting the work for amounts far higher than what the local business and government outlets were earning, (Wadley, 2014).

From what can be deduced, Owens was determined to advance and share the beauty and culture within these paintings to a wider international audience. He thus actively worked at promoting and improving their status and condition as well as making sure that the artists received the intellectual recognition and

income that their work was making in the US. To that effect, Owens was also responsible for setting up the Ethnic Arts Foundation, aiming to encourage young artists to continue the traditional Mithila painting. In 2003, following Owen's death, the Mithila Art Institute was set up in Madhubani using funds from his estate set aside for that purpose. According to Wadley, some of the best new generation of Mithila artists hail from the Mithila Art Institute, (Wadley, 2014).

Jyotindra Jain asserts that soon after independence, when the National crafts persons Awards were established, although women were nominated for the awards, they were largely excluded from major events and exhibitions held in London, Glasgow and Paris, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). The Handicrafts policies established by Kamaladevi and Pupul Jayakar with the backing of the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, went a long way towards providing opportunities to women artists. According to Jain, government endeavours helped many women artists to overcome cultural and social norms allowing them to participate in exhibitions and other events such as crafts markets, and competitions. As a result, although in comparative terms the numbers are minimal, – the total numbers of art prizes awarded during this time period were 600, – between 1965 and 1993, 80 women received the President's *National Awards for Excellence in Craftsmanship*, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). As professor and ethnologist Raphael Rousseleau states, these awards permitted many of the artists of these customarily neglected societies to be subsidized and empowered on the premise of their excellence as well as their originality and

innovative tendencies and capacities. "This prize plays a major role in the recognition of 'artistic personalities' and in the quasi-systematic patronage of these artists by the Craft Museum and other foreign museums" (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.12).

Jain asserts that at the time, the government pro-actively encouraged participation in art exhibitions and craft fairs specifically held in major Indian cities and abroad; even going so far as to provide the women with government sponsored escorts, when their personal circumstances and / or social norms required. As a result of these efforts which apart from providing institutionalized patronage also resulted in unprecedented exposure and visibility for the rural women artists, group identity organizations were formed fomenting recognition of specific artistic traditions such as the mirror embroidery production of Kutch in Gujarat or the *Chikkankari* work done in Lucknow, Pakistan, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). These efforts are also what led to the national and in some cases international recognition and acclaim of rural women Mithila artists such as Sita Devi, Baua Devi, Ganga Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Godavari Dutta, amongst others; as well as Sonabai and the sculpture of *Sarguja* in east central India, and Neelamani Devi for Manipur pottery in north eastern India.

However, Jain also asserts that although many of these artists' work have been shown internationally in very prestigious spaces, their work has often been purposely excluded from being shown in the same spaces as the "high-profile urban Indian artists in India," (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 502);

specifically by these urban artists themselves who do not want their work exhibited side by side with rural artists. Geeti Sen states that "the urban art spaces are zealously guarded against the entry of the contemporary folk artists by the moderns" (as cited in Jain, 2008, p. 502). Jain goes on to declare that

> The well-organized contemporary urban women artists have shown little concern or interest in the works of rural women artists, even when these reflected contemporary issues or even conscious expression of their struggle as women. In 1998, when Sonabai's work was prominently displayed at the Queensland Art gallery in Brisbane as a part of the *Asia Pacific Triennial*, a renowned modern Indian woman artist had protested against the entry of a rural artist in the space of 'modern' art (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 502).

(4.1.2) FIGURE - 86 A & B

A – (Above) – Shanti Devi, (n.d.). *Kohbar ghar* style Madhubani painting on a wall near the *Crafts Museum*, New Delhi. Photograph courtesy of Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty. Retrieved from: https://thewire.in/culture/an-artists-lifework-painted-over-by-the-brushstrokes-of-bureaucracy

B – (Below) – Pinki Kumari, (2004). *Marriage Icons.* Painted at the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani. Photograph courtesy of Ethnic Arts Foundation. Retrieved from: https://orias.berkeley.edu/resources-teachers/mithila-painting-folk-art-india

4.2 – VERNACULAR ART AND EMPOWERMENT

I set out to expand my world,
And discover its laughter and its pain,
I set out to find the woman within me,
And found instead an artist, speaking to
This woman within me,
Yes, I set out to expand my world

Radhaben Garva, (as cited in Roy and Garva, 2015. para. 37).

There have been numerous and varied collective and individual cases of liberation and empowerment, to a lesser or greater degree, attained by women throughout India from the extensive fabric of arts and crafts that abound in every corner of the sub-continent. Here I will attempt to recount case studies and examples of women who are specifically from rural environments, who have serendipitously managed to find themselves breaking out of the circle of oppression, contributing not only to an enrichened artistic heritage, but also to the booming national economy.

> I have seen years of struggle when we painted on cow dung smeared walls and hours of our work washed out by rain. But we didn't think there was any option. Then came paper, it changed our lives. What more can one ask for?" Mahasundari Devi (as cited in Rekha, 2010, p. 1); (Rekha, 2010, p. 1).

"Painting is in our culture – my mother used to paint and I started painting with her" – Shashikala Devi, (as cited in Rekha, 2010, p. 1).

Following the discovery by Archer and promotion of Mithila as well as other rural or what we now term vernacular art by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jayakar, and other academics and organizations, it can be safely stated that Indian vernacular creations and perhaps even more so, Madhubani paintings are now a relatively easily recognized art form; evidence suggesting that there has been an increasingly growing market with more and more demand and interest, from both academic and commercial sources. As Carolyn H. Brown states,

> In Mithila villages rural women pull out tattered copybooks in which are recorded brief passages by collectors from Germany, Britain, Israel, Japan, France, and the United States. The increasingly professionalized art is finding its public through such organizations as *Ray Owens's Ethnic Arts Foundation*, the *Self-Employed Women's Association* (SEWA) of Madhubani, and *Oxfam International*. UNESCO did a Christmas card collection of Mithila art, and it can also be found on calendars, incense boxes, and hotel walls in Bihar. There have been a number of traveling museum collections, among them a *Smithsonian SITES* collection and a *Visual Arts Resource* collection from the University of Oregon (Brown, 1996, p. 719).

Jyotindra Jain states that many of the artists who emerged from the "new exposure, visibility and institutionalised patronage and promotion of rural women's art practices" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 502), developed individualized or personalised styles of their traditional art practise; which lent them an alternative group identity and in turn helped to thrust some of them into the limelight of recognition, mainstream galleries and fame; alongside their urban counterparts. From this phenomenon came classifications with clear identities such as the *Kutch* art of mirror embroidery in Gujarat, or what is known as the *Chikkankari* embroidery from Lucknow, as well as the recognition of artists like Ganga Devi and Sita Devi, in Mithila painting, Sonabai Rajawar, from a village in Central India, for her clay sculptures and Sarguja and Neelamani Devi for their skill in Manipur pottery, in north east India. "Ganga Devi, Baua Devi, Sonabai and Neelamani Devi, among others, have received international acclaim for their innovative and individualistic work and their work has been exhibited in some of the most prestigious spaces of modern art abroad" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 502).

As we have seen, several experts, Jyotindra Jain, Carolyn H. Brown and Richard H. Davis, amongst others, unequivocally assert that the new national and international attention on rural art resulted in highly profound repercussions on the lives of many individual women. I shall attempt to present and analyse individual stories of some of the most empowering, highly transforming case studies of vernacular women artists that I have managed to find. As Jyotindra Jain states,

> It is customary for art-historians to trace the evolution of individual artists who belong to mainstream modern art. On the other hand, the creative expression or rural and tribal artists has always been seen by most of them as a product of ethnic collectivity whose authenticity lies in the remoteness of time and space (as cited in Davis, R. H., 2008, p. 90).

Neel Rekha asserts that Devaki Jain carried out detailed studies in the changes and resulting empowerment of rural women artists. She examined the lives they had led before they were discovered, and their work was commercialized; and the sweeping changes they experienced afterwards, (Rekha, Maithil Paintings, 2011). Devaki Jain used empirical data, records and details from the works of previous scholars, Including people like Raymond Lee Owens to conclude that the women artists lives had been clearly "transformed from the 'dependent partner' into a vital contributor to family income. This fact alone has endowed the women with a certain distinction and esteem (as cited in Rekha, Maithil Paintings, 2011, p. 11). As can be inferred, the analysis and writings of scholars have focused on distinct aspects of rural art, from examining the art forms, making pictorial compilations, studying the cultural heritage, customs and historical background to the gradual evolution and focus on the artists themselves, their individual creativity and empowerment. It is specifically the aspect of empowerment that we address here. As Jain asserts

The phenomenon of individual expression is and has always been an integral part of the so-called collective tradition. The cases […] here are of those women artists whose works are distinguished not only as fine works of art, but as works of artists who are women, as works representative of their predicament and their anguish (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 504).

4.2.1 GANGA DEVI

According to Mani Shekhar Singh, Ganga Devi is amongst one of the most celebrated, vernacular woman artists of India, (Singh M. S., 2004). Carolyn Brown Heinz states, that there existed a cultural context, – into which I will not delve at present – which "militated against allowing women to engage in the kind of income-producing labor that the first stages of the paper art entailed. It was only the low-ranking villagers around Madhubani who took up Kulkarni's challenge" (Heinz, 2006, p. 22). Heinz is making reference to the challenge of painting on paper, the mission that Bombay artist Baskar Kulkarni, initially sent to the region by Pupul Jayakar was asked to carry out.

Heinz encountered the continued existence of this issue as relatively recently as the 1980s, when attempting to employ female assistants while carrying out fieldwork. Furthermore, as Heinz also asserts, it would be fairly difficult for the average occidental woman, to appreciate the control that these cultural traditions continue to exercise on many women, especially those from well to do, highly orthodox Hindu families. It is only as the monetary advantages began to be perceived and the growing popularity and fame of the art converted into regional pride that more women began to take up the practice.

As a result, the women who initially started painting were either widows or abandoned brides from the lower ranks or impoverished groups of Maithili

Brahmins and other nearby regions, (Heinz, 2006). Ganga Devi is a rural artist whose life and work provide an uplifting example of the profound transformation, empowerment and positive repercussions that recognition can result in. Unfortunately, the artists we will examine are amongst a few of the more fortunate women, in a reality that often continues to be largely hidden, ignored and deplorably lacking in the most basic and fundamental of rights.

Ganga Devi was born in about 1926, to a *Kayastha* family – a variation of the supposedly superior, upper cast Brahmin – in a village called *Chatara* in the Madhubani district of Bihar in east India, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005), (Davis, 2008). According to various accounts, her mother was locally well-known for her skill in traditional wall painting and her father was a relatively wealthy landowner. She was married at the age of 15 to a man who was from a poor and less educated or cultured family than hers. She is said to have complained about the lack of painting skills amongst the women of her husband's village. Ganga Devi's marriage lasted a mere eight to ten years, most likely due to the fact that after having lost a baby soon after birth, for reasons that were never known, – within these societies, childlessness is always blamed on the woman, medical tests are never carried out and the unfortunate wife is always accused of being barren, – she did not conceive any other children, (Davis, 2008).

In the rural populations of India, – a notion from the Vedas that continues to prevail in many urban areas as well – the foremost role of a wife is to produce children; even more significantly, male children. The wife's status in the

prevalent extended family household is directly related to the number of male children that she bears, (Mishra & Dubey, 2014). It would seem that as Ganga Devi didn't have any children, while her younger sisters-in-law gradually became mothers, her husband married a second woman, – a practice that is not entirely uncommon in rural areas of India and to lesser degree can be found in urban areas too. From then onwards, her life gradually spiralled downwards into an abyss of envy, male domination and despair, (Davis, 2008), (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005).

Ganga Devi describes the occurrences in her life at the time as leading to "My eyes got shut, the world was shut off, there was darkness all around. I felt as if I had arrived in hell" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 91). Jyotindra Jain states that similarly to other Kayastha women of her generation, Ganga Devi's earlier paintings had been limited to painting the *kohbar-ghar* – the bride's wedding chamber, – *the aripan*, – the ritual floor paintings – and the five pieces of paper that were traditionally used to send *sindoor*, – vermillion powder – to the groom, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). Jain asserts that the finest and most elaborate examples of Mithila painting tradition are those of the Kayastha women, and that all of this tradition is embedded in the ritual paintings of the walls, floors and sindoor wraps. Jain further asserts that with the introduction of paper, although most of the artists "continued to derive the essence of their pictorial expression from age-old traditions (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 504); they also "discovered an unprecedented freedom from the confines of pre-

determined religious iconography and the highly formalised geometric symbolism of ritual wall and floor paintings" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 504).

With the introduction of paper that lead to the opportunity of a certain amount of liberty of artistic expression, Jain states that "several individual painters emerged whose work showed signs of a radical departure within the context of their own tradition" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 504). Ganga Devi was amongst these artists. As Jain further asserts:

> Ganga Devi's evolution as an artist is deeply connected with the socio-cultural norms of the *Kayastha* cast to which she belonged, but more important in her development were a series of agonising events in her personal life which led her to seek solace in art (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 505).

The rejection of her husband, who from a number of accounts, took a new wife and "threw her out on the streets" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 505), (Davis, 2008, p. 91), made Ganga Devi take the decision to go back to her own village and work with Shakti Devi, her childhood friend who had already started painting for commercially ends. It would seem that although Shakti Devi provided her with the necessary supplies to start painting, she ultimately exploited Ganga Devi and other artists, by not allowing them to sign their paintings, trading their creations alongside her own to supply the demand from Delhi and Patna. In essence, Shakti Devi had set herself up as a supplier and took both artistic credit

and financial benefits by selling the work of other artists, while paying them a pittance of the large profit that she made.

Ganga Devi's fortunes began to improve in the early 1970s with the establishment of the *Madhubani Office* by the Ministry of Textiles, (Davis, 2008, p. 91). The office aimed to encourage the creation of the paintings and offered a chosen number of artists, amongst them Ganga Dev, the amount of 1500 rupees to help them buy paper and supplies on which to create their paintings. At about that time, between 1973 and 1974, the French writer and journalist Yves Vequaud, who had been travelling back and forth as a dealer and patron of Madhubani painting, noticed the exceptional quality of Ganga Devi's paintings. He had up until then received his supply of paintings from Shakti Devi. This time he was spending several months in the region making a film about the women artists of Madhubani. He noticed the unique quality of Ganga Devi's work which stood out from the rest and eventually managed to pry the truth regarding who the actual artist was out of Shakti Devi. Vequaud then visited Ganga Devi in her home and provided her not only with more supplies and paintings but also with other amenities to help ease the conditions of her poverty.

Thus, with Vequaud's support and patronage, "Ganga Devi began to gain recognition as an outstanding practitioner of Madhubani painting", (Davis, 2008, p. 92). Soon after, Vequaud introduced her to Pupul Jayakar and Indira Gandhi, as well as promoting and exhibiting her work in Delhi. In a short space of time, this exposure attracted the attention of the All India Handicrafts Board who

encouraged Ganga Devi to present a painting for the prestigious National Award, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005).

From accounts available, it appears that by this time Ganga Devi was again living in her husband's home sharing the space with his new wife. Her living conditions, nor the space available in her home at the time, were conducive to her working on the large sheet of paper which Mr. H. P. Misra, – "the then Assistant Director of the Marketing and Service Extension Centre, Madhubani, Bihar, which was run by the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India," – (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 523), had provided her with in order to encourage her to apply for the National Award for Master Craftsperson. Jain states that Ganga Devi expressed the need for a spacious and peaceful place in which to paint for the National Award, something that was simply not feasible in her husband's home, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005).

There are somewhat contradictory accounts by Jain regarding the places where she stayed during this period and her personal feelings regarding the space and atmosphere in her home as well as what would best benefit her painting. Jyotindra Jain recounts that Ganga Devi made the following observation:

> Misra Sahib[106] of the Madhubani Office obtained a large piece of paper and asked me to paint on it. I told him that I had no place to sit and paint. There

[106] A title normally used in India to show respect for a man. People rarely refer to each other using simply their names. This would be seen as lacking in respect. Such titles are

(continuación de la nota al pie)

> was no peace at home Misraji invited me to stay in his house and paint there. On this, my husband's brother said: 'You have got our nose and ears chopped', (downgraded the family's honour by staying in another man's house). My husband said: I will tear the paper to pieces'. They said they would not allow me to go to Madhubani and live with Misra Sahib's family. Badridas, my sister's relative, intervened and I just left for Madhubani. Misra Sahib and his wife were very kind to me… I painted day and night. My husband knew this much, that I was not a woman of bad character. My co-wife was also quiet after she learnt that I had a grant of Rs 1500[107]. (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 507).

On another occasion, Jain states that Ganga Devi never managed to escape the pain of family humiliation.

> Once I told my husband: "We should keep contact otherwise the bastiwallas [neighbours] will think badly of you." But he said: "I married a second time because I did not like you. I will not let you live here." His younger brother kept me in his house; I worked there. But everyone in the basti – neighbourhood – advised me not to work so hard. They said I should go to

always added to names. Devi is an example of another such title, as is adding Ji to the name.

[107] The equivalent is approximately €21.25 at current exchange rates.

> Chatara and live there comfortably with my brothers. I said: "Even if I have to beg, I will live here. By living here I suffer pain, but only in pain will God appear to me. In my brother's house there is wealth and comfort. In comfort I will forget God. I will stay here" (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 92).

Perhaps one of the most enticing qualities of Ganga Devi's art is the apparently unique capacity she had, as a rural artist, to truly individualise her painting even as she maintained its ethnicity. As we have seen Jyotindra Jain state previously, although individual expression was not naturally visible in the collective tradition, Ganga Devi was amongst the few artists whose personal touch was clearly distinguishable even while staying true to the collective tradition. On the one hand she was able to find an escape from the harrowing experiences that she was often forced to endure in life; while in other cases, her work was a reflection of the numerous and varied new adventures and experiences that fame and recognition brought her way. This was a trait relatively unique to Ganga Devi that does not appear to be common amongst the other rural women artists of the Madhubani region. As Jyotindra Jain states,

> Her chaotic life and the harmonious world of her painting are intrinsically related. In her personal life there was an all-round invasion and encroachment; but, as if to cope with this, in her painting each character, each image, is provided with its own breathing space. Her inner turmoil led her to create, at least on canvas, a world full of peace and order (Jain, Ray,

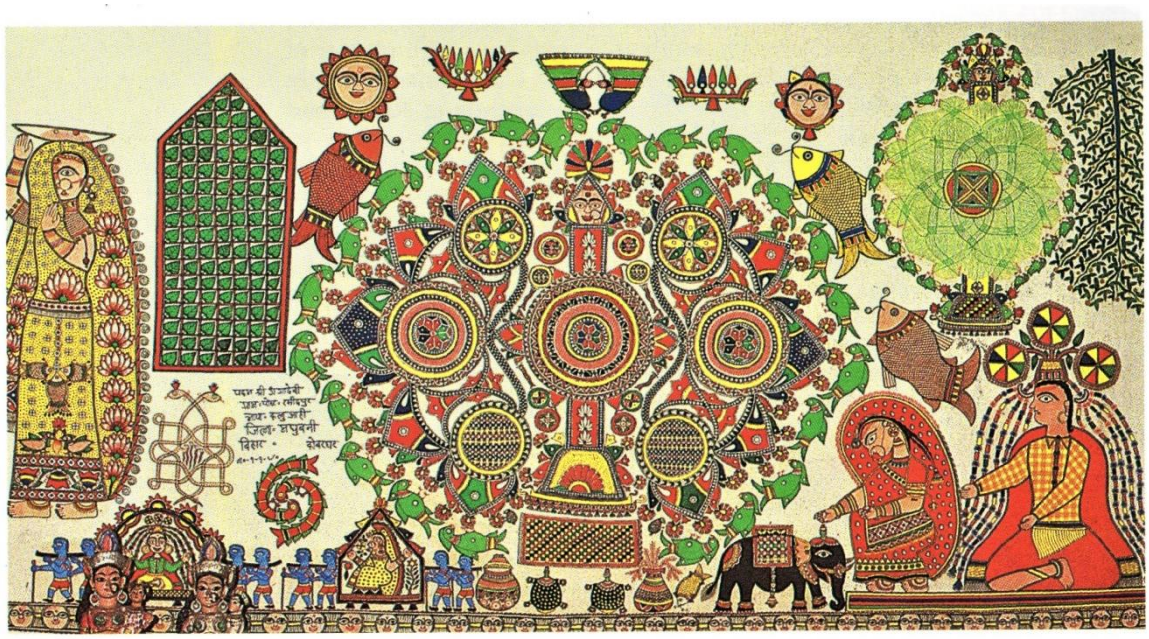
& Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 505). See: (4.1.2) FIGURE - 85, (4.2.1) FIGURE - 87 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 89.

I talk about the personalisation and individuality of the paintings as being relatively unique to Ganga Devi because as Jyotindra Jain asserts, in studying the evolution of the rural women artists, one can see that

> The works are marked by a deep routing in their own inherited practices of women's art as well as an effort to depart from the collective tradition in favour of individual expression. This is a significant aesthetic shift as the faceless collectivity is conventionally associated with women and individuality with men. […] However, most of the women artist's works are still imbedded in a sort of 'natural' expression of women in terms of women's aesthetics rarely questioning women's social confinement and politics of their subordination by men or not seeking their own group identity or social criticism" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 502).

This condition would seem to be exacerbated by the fact that the dependence of the women's families for an income from their work, alongside increasing popularity and world market demand for these paintings has brought about the pressure of mass production; as such, the artists tend to shape their work in terms of what they perceive as commercially popular and in so doing, quite possibly sacrifice the opportunity to work towards giving expression to their own

personal story. Obviously the demand for their work can be assessed only as being highly positive and empowering. As stated earlier, it has provided them with a dignified means of income, uplifting an area which is known to be drought affected, which in the post-independence era was highly dependent on government handouts while the women practised the mindless, unproductive labour of breaking stones.



(4.2.1) FIGURE - 87

Ganga Devi, (1989). Detail of: *Kohbar- ghar; wall paintings on bride's wedding chamber*. [Pigments on concrete wall]. Painted during her 'cancer years' on the walls of the *Crafts Museum* in New Delhi. The work was whitewashed "in an act of *bureaucratic vandalism*" (Pisharoty, 2015, p. para. 1). Photographs courtesy of Jyotindra Jain (Jain J. , 1998, p. 75). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

As such, whatever the case may be, as Jain quite validly points out "the fact that the rural women artists have begun to talk about their suppression and contest their confinement […] have begun to express their predicament in their work […] is in itself a remarkable phenomenon" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 503). However, as previously stated, Jain also highlights that although many of the women artists have recounted episodes of "torture or suppression by their male partners or male members of their society," (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 502)*;* comparatively little of these experiences are reflected in their work. The key issue I would like to highlight here is that this fact is relative. Jain himself has recounted exceptions, even though they might be few. A clear example can be found in the work of a group of rural women artists from Bihar, who have created embroidery, and applique panels that depict the domestic torture, rape and dowry deaths to which the women were and are frequently subjected.[108]

In a film produced and directed by American anthropologist, Raymond Lee Owens, titled *Mithila Painters: Five Village Artists From Madhubani, India* which is part of a South Asian documentary series, by the University of Wisconsin Madison Centre for South Asia; we witness that soon after beginning to paint on

[108] See: (Asia Society Galleries, 1998)

https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/51816953/sujni-embroidery-cluster-national-institute-of-fashion-technology

DOI: 10.2307/3178647 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178647

paper, Ganga Devi was awarded the *National Craftsman* award and invited by the government to participate in an exhibition in Moscow,[109] (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999). She quickly gained international attention and was able to buy farm land registered in her name as well as have a new room added to her husband's home for herself.

FIGURE- 88

Ganga Devi (n.d.). Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India. (Jain J. , 1998, p. 70).

This fact in itself may be considered as highly empowering considering the circumstances, and definitely life changing. We are discussing the cases of women who are often unable to take even the simplest of steps without the consent

[109] To watch the film please visit: https://ethnicartsfoundation.com/classic-films/

of their men folk. There is evidence that previous to being discovered by the French writer, Yves Vequaud, who was pertinent to drawing attention to Ganga Devi's work in Delhi as well as involving the *All India Handicrafts Board*, who then encourage her to paint for the *National Award,* (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). Ganga Devi had been relegated to the status of a maid servant in her home, obliged to sleep on the veranda, while her husband had taken another wife, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999).

Jyotindra Jain classifies Ganga Devi's artistic development in various stages and emphasizes that her personal circumstances were defining agents in her work, not only in terms of visual aesthetics and subject matter, but also in allowing for the unique and skilled style that she developed. See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 89. From all accounts, Ganga Devi led a happy and carefree childhood, growing up in the small village of Chatara with her parents and sister. As was the norm, she learnt the art of Madhubani painting gradually, following in the steps of her mother and the other women painters from the village; initially participating in ritual floor paintings, using pigments made out of rice paste and fine twigs as brushes. These floor paintings marked specific auspicious and sacred dates in the calendar, as well as the different stages of life, right from conception and birth to learning, puberty and marriage, as presented much later in her renowned *The Cycle of Life series.* See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 89 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 90.

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 89

Ganga Devi, (1983-85). Detail of: *A Scene from rural Mithila*: *The Cycle of Life*. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India. (Jain J. , 1998, p. 80). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

The beginnings of Ganga Devi's paintings are rooted in these floor paintings. Her concern for ritual purity in everyday life was responsible for the iconographic perfection of her earlier work, and the symbolic overtones of her imagery highly characteristic of her later paintings (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 506)

The Painting of the walls of bride's wedding chambers and other artefacts alongside accompanying items which form integral parts of the elaborate Mithila wedding ceremonies contributed crucially to Ganga Devi's artistic development in her formative years, and were also highly relevant to her cultivating the style of painting that she was to be recognised for, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005); (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999). Ganga Devi interpreted the symbolic painting of the wedding chambers as important ritualistic steps through which the married couples are blessed with fertility and abundance. "[…] she understood the Kohbar painting not as mere 'festive decoration'" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 506).

As Jain states, Ganga Devi interpreted the process of the wedding chamber paintings as being crucial to the wellbeing of the couple in question which meant that the painting was to be elaborated in absolute purity of form and faith. Purity of form, as Ganga Devi interpreted and expressed in her work meant the most faithful and true.

> Pictorial reconstruction and synthesisation of the magico-religious world comprising of deities, sacred trees […] with forms ranging from representational-narrative to purely abstract-symbolic […]. The entire Khobar painting is understood by her as a magical edifice in which each image, each symbol is to be conceptualised with utmost purity of sense and form" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 506). See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 87 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 91.

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 90 A & B

A – Ganga Devi, (1983-85). Detail of *young woman being given a ritual bath on the attainment of puberty: The Cycle of Life series*. [Inks on paper]. Photographs courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, (Jain J. , 1997). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. Retrieved from: http://50watts.com/Riding-the-Rollercoaster-with-Ganga-Devi

B – Ganga Devi, (1983-85). Detail of *Pregnant woman reclining on the ground: The Cycle of Life series*. [Inks on paper]. Photographs courtesy of Jyotindra Jain Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India (Jain J. , 1998, p. 80). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

It is clear that Ganga Devi put her whole being and soul into her work, conceiving it as her spiritual mission and duty towards the gods and herself. As Jain points out, in Ganga Devi's own words, "impure expression leads to self-destruction" (as cited in Jain J., 2005. p. 506). Ganga Devi's understanding of 'self-destruction' lay in the ill effects caused by angry gods, bad spirits or karma

as well as going against her artistic self. Jain states that the influence of this philosophy was to stay with her throughout her life.

> These perceptions, which crystallised in the early stage of her career and in the context of ritual wall and floor paintings, continued to pervade her later works even in the context of purely secular themes, […]. The concern for magical purity became transformed into the purity of expression (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 506).

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 91 A, B & C

A – Ganga Devi, (1989). Detail: *Naina Jogin, Kohbar- ghar; wall paintings on bride's wedding chamber.* [Inks on paper].

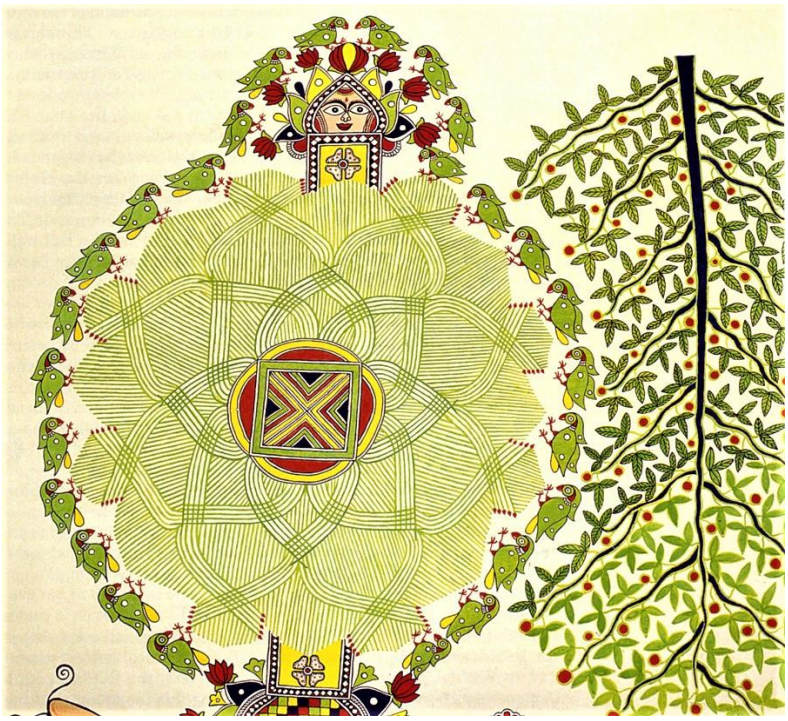
B & C – Ganga Devi, (1989). Detail: *Naina Jogin, Kohbar- ghar; wall paintings on bride's wedding chamber.* [Pigments on concrete wall]. Painted during her 'cancer years' on the walls of the *Crafts Museum* in New Delhi. Photographs courtesy of Jyotindra Jain (Jain J. , 1997); (Jain J. , 1998, p. 77). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. Detail of: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 87

Amongst the relatively well known and easily recognisable series in Ganga Devi's paintings is the *Ramayana Series.* See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 93 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 94. This comprises of paintings based on the mythological legend of the lives of the Hindu King and Queen (god and goddess) Rama and Sita; recounted earlier in this study. As the legend goes, Sita was banished from the kingdom at whim by her husband Rama. Ganga Devi was clearly able to relate to the public humiliation, as well as personal shame and pain portrayed in this legend, within the highly conservative culture of the rural Hindu society, as a reflection of the painful reality of her own life. We can safely presume that this anguish poignantly inspired her rendering of the series based on the Ramayana legend.[110]

The *'Cycle of Life'*, series which Ganga Devi began painting in 1982 is considered as being amongst her greatest and most epic works. See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 89 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 90. As Jain asserts, "With this painting she truly crossed the threshold of convention to excavate fresh grounds hitherto untouched by any painter from the Mithila tradition or herself?" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 508). It is clear that in the process of painting the *Cycle of Life*, her individuality, talent and stylistic maturity as an artist were

[110] Visit: http://50watts.com/Riding-the-Rollercoaster-with-Ganga-Devi; http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/Index, for quality images of Ganga Devi's and other Mithila artists' work.

unequivocally established. The series obliged her to break away from much of the traditional techniques. The task at hand was to interpret themes that were based on the daily lives of the people of Madhubani.



(4.2.1) FIGURE - 92

Ganga Devi, (1989). Detail of: *Kohbar-ghar; wall paintings on bride's wedding chamber.* [Pigments on concrete wall]. Painted during her 'cancer years' on the walls of the Crafts Museum in New Delhi. Courtesy of Jyotindra Jain (Jain J. , 1998, p. 75). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

Detail of: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 87.

Her focus in this piece was on depicting the ritual events of initiation into various stages of life. This we will recall is also a throwback to the floor painting she did during her youth. However, as Jain states, while the iconography in the floor paintings of her youth fell within the established imagery used for traditional ritualistic Madhubani painting, in this case the challenge for Ganga Devi lay in

that she was required to represent "the full story of human life as a continuous narrative in which each image, each scene and each sequence, was conceived afresh without any reference to a pre-existing model in her own tradition" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 508).

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 93 A & B

A – Ganga Devi, (1977). Detail of *Stories of Rama (II), Rama killing Ravana: Ramayana series.* [Inks on paper].

B – Ganga Devi, (1977). Detail of *Stories of Rama (II), Hanuman jumping across the ocean*: *Ramayana series.* [Inks on paper]. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain (Jain J. , 1997). Retrieved from: http://50watts.com/Riding-the-Rollercoaster-with-Ganga-Devi

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 94 A& B

A – Ganga Devi, (1977). Detail of *Ferryman washing Rama's feet: Ramayana series.* [Inks on paper].

B – Ganga Devi, (1977). Detail of *Fight between Bali and Sugriva*: *Ramayana series.* [Inks on paper]. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India (Jain J. , 1998, pp. 78, 79). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

The creation of the *Cycle of Life* required that Ganga Devi resolve the challenge of portraying elaborate and intricate details of social events, customs, religious beliefs and festivities in one connected narrative. "The temporal dimension of Cycle of Life unscrolls horizontally to encompass a multitude of images in a double interaction of time and space" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 508). The whole piece was created in twenty four parts in which each part captures the most significant stages of the different phases in the growing up process; as understood in the Madhubani tradition of the Mithila region. As Jain asserts,

> This being unprecedented both in her work and in Madhubani tradition, she had to dive deep into the ocean of her imagination to find a new pictorial vocabulary. The results were startlingly fresh and original. […]The resultant effect was that of a universe teeming with scores of people, trees, birds, animals – all part of a great celebration of life – from one birth to the next (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 508).

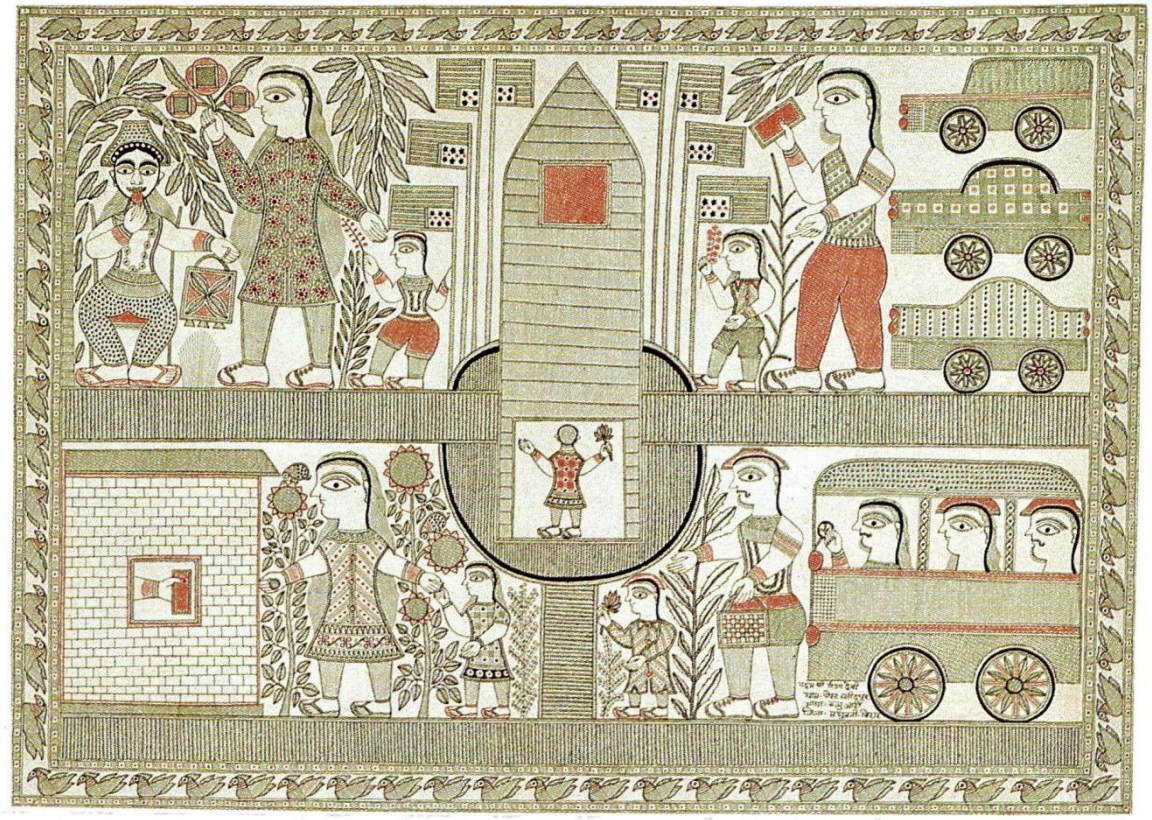
In 1985, soon after completing the *Cycle of Life* series, Ganga Devi was invited to participate in an exhibition of Indian folk art and culture in Washington, in the United States. The highly diverse experiences alongside the vastly varied cultural and physical encounters of that trip, in total contrast to her rural homeland; were the source of inspiration of what was termed by Jyotindra Jain as her *American Series*. In her *American Series*, Ganga Devi's painting took on a minimalistic style which incorporated imagery almost in a graphic art form.

She drew from her memory during the two years after her return from the United States to create canvases filled with American flags, stylized cars and other motor vehicles of several decks, rollercoaster rides, people dressed in a mix of Western and Indian clothing walking about carrying large shopping bags, and other visual stimuli that had caught her attention and captivated her imagination in some way or another. As Jain states, "The imagery […] gives the painting a surrealistic quality, as if an American dream painted on a celluloid sheet had been

super-imposed upon a distant Madhubani landscape" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 509).

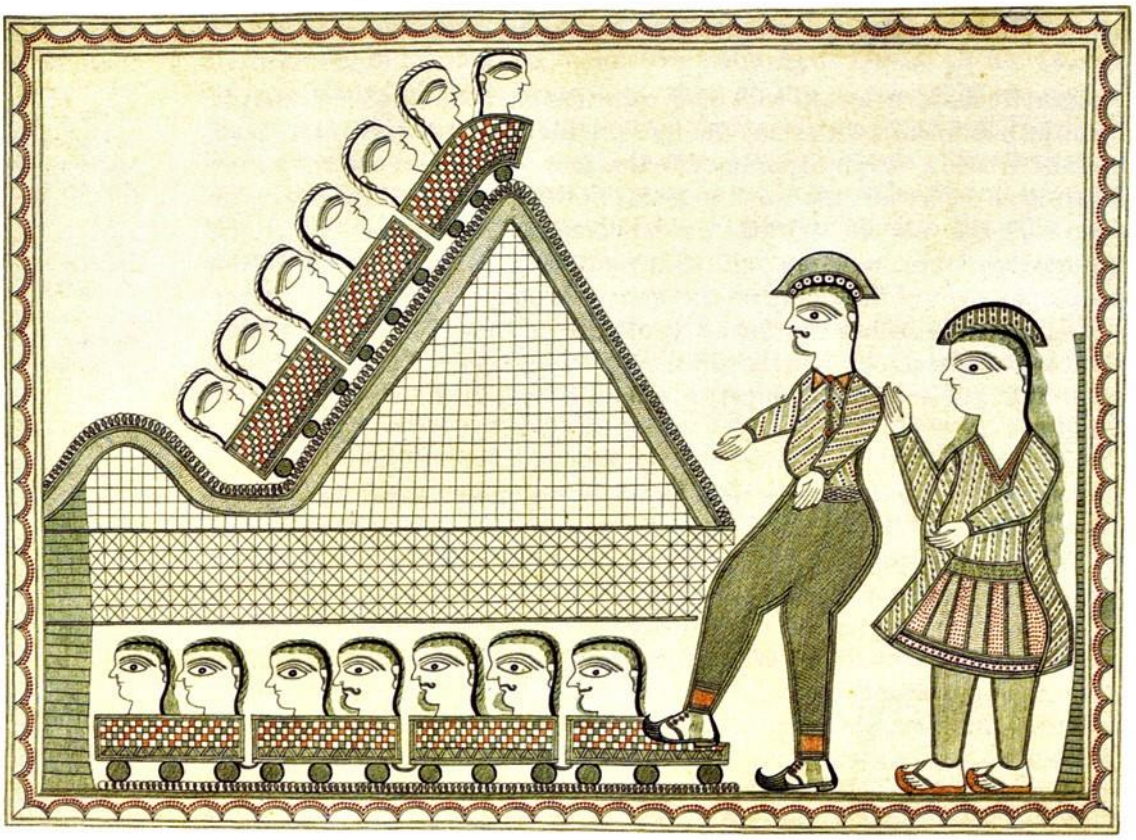
In the *American series* it would be safe to state that Gang Devi's style truly matured She transformed the recognisable, but to her unfamiliar, everyday stimuli she saw on her trip which also made up her main source of inspiration for this series into what Jain calls "completely imaginary and 'fantastic' objects. […] (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 509). See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 95 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 96. Thus, as Jain further asserts, her work came "a full circle at another plane of artistic awareness!" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 509).

The final pieces that Ganga Devi painted came to be known as her *Cancer Series.* See: (4.2.1) FIGURE - 97 and (4.2.1) FIGURE - 98. In 1987 she was diagnosed with cancer. From then onwards, until her death in 1991, her work was dominated by the effects of the ailment on both her physical and mental health. She created four pieces that portrayed her experiencing the disease and treatment at the different stages, from the moment when she was diagnosed to the long periods of hospitalization, lying flat on the hospital bed with nothing but the swirling ceiling fans and hospital lights for company. In this series, she portrays herself repeatedly "establishing the typology of her own image in the first painting" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 510), in the different phases of her life. As Jain asserts, this is perhaps the only instance recorded of any "artist belonging to the tribal or rural traditions of India" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 510) creating autobiographical paintings of their life.



(4.2.1) FIGURE - 95

Ganga Devi, (1986). *Festival of American Folk Life*: *American series.* [Inks on paper]. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India (Jain J. , 1998, p. 82). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.



(4.2.1) FIGURE - 96

Ganga Devi, (1986). *Ride in a Roller coaster: American series.* [Inks on paper]. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India (Jain J. , 1998, p. 82). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 97

Ganga Devi, (1988-89). *Proceeding to Delhi: Cancer series.* [Inks on paper]. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India (Jain J. , 1998, p. 85). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

(4.2.1) FIGURE - 98

Ganga Devi, (1988-89). *Cancer Ward: Cancer series.* [Inks on paper]. Photograph courtesy of Jyotindra Jain, Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India (Jain J. , 1998, p. 85). Collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

4.2.2 SITA DEVI

Sita Devi is also amongst the most celebrated of the first generation of Mithila artists who later became celebrities, (Heinz, 2006). Sita Devi was from the *Mahapatra* Brahman cast – the lowest of the five Brahman categories – and she lived in a village called *Jitwarpur*, approximately just short of two and a half kilometres north of the town of Madhubani. She was born in about 1911 and was the youngest daughter of one of the wealthiest landlords of a village in the Saharsa district of Bihar, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999).

Sita Devi attended school for five years but was betrothed at the age of eleven, supposedly to the son of a family of high status in Jitwarpur, west of the Saharsa district. She went to live with her husband when she was sixteen; however, soon after her arrival there it became clear that her husband's family were so desperately poor that they were unable to feed even themselves properly. Her father and elder brother sent her bags of rice, and she would occasionally return to her maternal home staying there for approximately a month where she would get sufficient food and nourishment to build up her strength. It would appear that as a result of malnutrition Sita Devi lost three of her children; two in infancy and one at the age of five, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999).

Jitwarpur had always been an impoverished village where mostly people from the *Mahapatra* Brahman cast resided. Initially, when the artist Baskar

Kulkarni first arrived to the Madhubani region on Pupul Jayakar's instructions, in order to guide the women on how to paint on paper, he met with resistance from the orthodox upper cast Brahmans. They traditionally equated the family honour to the seclusion of their womenfolk, considering the idea of a working woman as demeaning, let alone the notion of a family actually living of the earnings of a women member.

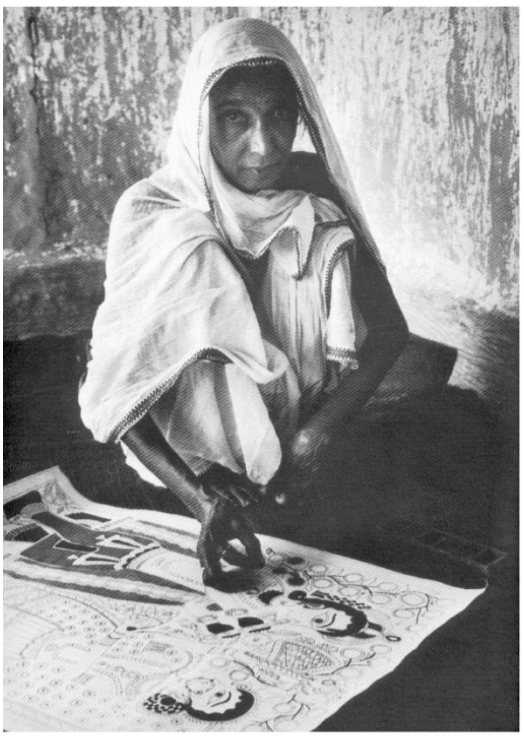
However, in Jitwarpur most of the inhabitants were not upper class Brahmans. They were therefore much less orthodox in their thinking. They were quick to respond to the opportunity offered by Baskar Kulkarni and soon he was selling their work in Delhi through the All India Handicrafts Board, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999). In 1969, Swami Jitwarpur, owner of the *Chanakya Art Gallery* in Delhi decided to put on an exhibition of Sita Devi's work. She worked initially on the paintings for the exhibition with her two grown up sons, Ram Dev and Surya Dev. She continued to work later on with Surya Dev, who developed the skills required to help her with her work.

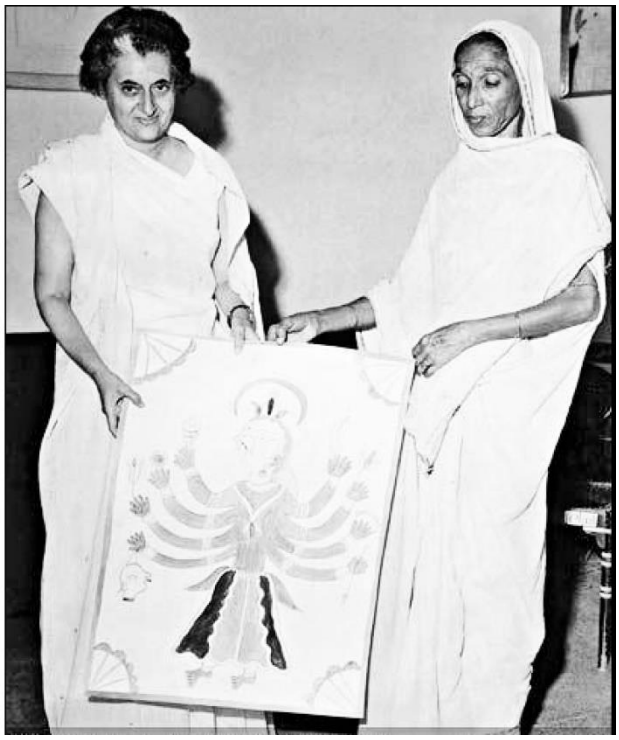
The exhibition in Chanakya Art Gallery drew national and international media attention and both Sita Devi and her son were quickly thrust into the limelight. They performed live demonstrations of the painting process and eventually received an invitation from the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi to her residence. Sita Devi presented Indira Gandhi with a live demonstration of her work, painting an image of the Hindu goddess Durga, using a matchstick for a brush, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999). See: (4.2.2) FIGURE - 99. From then

onwards, Sita Devi and her son enjoyed increasingly more widespread fame, receiving numerous awards, prizes and commissions in recognition of the quality and talent displayed in their paintings, both nationally and internationally.

In 1977, *the Master Craftsmen Association* was set up as a means of ensuring the maintenance of the high quality artistic standards of Mithila painters as well as protecting them and ensuring that they received fair prices for their work. That same year, a book by Yves Vequaud titled *'The Women Painters of Mithila'*, – (The Art of Mithila, Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom) was also published. – Carolyn Heinz has denominated it as the "bible of Mithila Art" (Heinz, 2006, p. 18). Heinz states that in 1977, at the time of the publication of the book, the artists still worked in a kind of traditional anonymity. In the book, none of the painters are attributed as the authors of the illustrated works, although their names can be distinguished on some of the pieces themselves. See: (4.2.2) FIGURE - 100 and (4.2.2) FIGURE - 101. Nor do the photographs of the artists, including Sita Devi herself, identify them as such.

However, towards the end of the 1970s the women began to claim ownership by signing their paintings on the back "to be sure they received credit and payment. This process formed part of the transformations of subjectivity and identity that accompanied the transformations in the art itself" (Heinz, 2006, p. 19).





(4.2.2) FIGURE - 99 A & B

A – Edouard Boubat, (1970), in L'art du Mithila by Yves Véquaud. *Padma Sri Sita Devi*. Courtesy of Suman Jha family collection. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/SitaDeviArtist/photos/a.607141875980081/607145572646378/?type=3&theater

B – Sita Devi, (c. 1970). Photographed sharing finished painting with Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, after live demonstration. Courtesy of Suman Jha family collection. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/SitaDeviArtist/photos/a.939891796038419/2336734249687493/?type=3&theater

In this way Sita Devi and the other women painters began to recognise the monetary value of their signatures. Sita Devi served on the governing board of the *Master Craftsmen Association* and by the 1980s had acquired the status of a highly eminent painter amongst Mithila artists, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999). Her

work was valued at the highest prices and she was able to invest in land and set her family up with a secure financial base from then onwards, (Owens, Elder, & Donowitz, 1999).

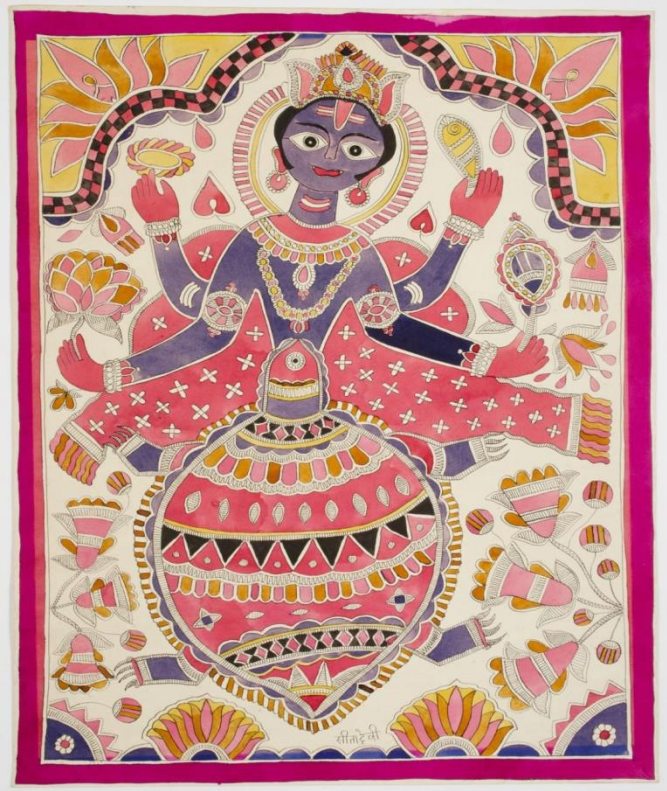
(4.2.2) FIGURE - 100 A & B

A – Sita Devi, (c. 1960-70). *Ardharaishvara* (Merged half female and half male form of Shiva and Parvati). [Watercolor on paper] Bihar, Mithila Region, India Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, South Asian Art. Gift of Dr. Jaipaul, 2000. Accession Number: 2000-92-5. Retrieved from: https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/107034.html#

B – Detail: Lower central area where Sita Devi's signature is visible in Hindi.

Evidence indicates that many of the women who were initially accepting of Baskar Kulkarni's paper painting project did so as a means of escape from dire personal circumstances. It is only later on when the monetary benefits began to emerge and pride in the growing recognition and fame of the art developed that more women became interested in participating in the paper movement. Heinz affirms that with the exception of a few like Sita Devi, the typical women who joined the painting on paper movement in Madhubani were young widows who had been married to men much older and had suddenly found themselves alone or had been abandoned by their husbands, like Ganga Devi, (Heinz, 2006).

In the case of Sita Devi, circumstances were much more fortuitous. Her husband was alive when she started painting on paper. However, it might have been the clear contrast in wealth compared to her parents' situation that emboldened her to initially challenge the status quo at home and convince her husband about participating in the project. In the beginning, although he didn't mind the painting in itself, her husband was unhappy with the appearance of buyers. We must bear in mind that traditionally the brides were kept hidden away and seldom seen. This in itself is quite astounding to conceive; that the women who would normally never be seen outside their homes were soon travelling to different cities and abroad, participating in exhibitions, doing commissions and receiving awards.



(4.2.2) FIGURE - 101 A & B

A – Sita Devi, (c.mid 1960-70). *Kurmavatara (Vishnu's Incarnation as a Tortoise)*. [Watercolor on paper] Bihar, Mithila Region, India.

Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, South Asian Art. Gift of Dr. Jaipaul, 2000. Accession Number: 2000-92-4

Retrieved from: https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/107033.html#

B – Detail: Lower central area where Sita Devi's signature is visible in Hindi.

As Carolyn Heinz asserts, "One of the outcomes of the professionalization of the paper art has been the individuation of the women artists. Sita Devi has traveled [sic] extensively in Europe and India, and been photographed with Indira Gandhi and other Indian leaders" (Heinz, 2006, p. 19). See: (4.2.2) FIGURE - 99.

(4.2.2) FIGURE - 102 A & B

A – Sita Devi, (c. 1973). *Durga*.

B – Sita Devi, (c. 1973). *The Goddess Ganga standing on a Makara* [Ink and coloured paint on paper]. Madhubani Painting, Bihar (Jitwapur Village), India. Courtesy of South & South East Asia Collection, ©Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Gift of J. L. and B. Naylor 1983, on behalf of the late Mr. and Mrs. P. Naylor.

A – Retrieved from: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O82394/durga-painting-devi-sita/

B – Retrieved from: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O82397/the-goddess-ganga-standing-on-painting-devi-sita/

Heinz also highlights that within a few years, approximately by the mid-1970s, the efforts and encouragement of anthropologists and other collaborators alongside "the promise of an international market for their work" (Heinz, 2006, p. 23), led to

professionalization of women from Jitwarpur and neighbouring villages in the art of Mithila painting; which soon became "a serious economic activity for women and a few men" (Heinz, 2006, p. 23).

Sita Devi's husband later took on the role of her agent and assistant, alongside her two elder sons, helping her to negotiate fair deals and filling in the colours on the artwork that she had already drawn or outlined. Later on, her husband's nephew's wife, her niece in law, Baua Devi, also took up the profession. Baua Devi is amongst the highest esteemed of the younger generation of Madhubani artists, (Heinz, 2006). See:(4.2.2) FIGURE - 103. Other relatively well-known Madhubani artists from the first and second generation of paper artists are Shakti Devi, Jagdamba Devi Das, Lalita Devi and Sushila Devi.

Apart from the efforts of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jayakar and other eminent women scholars and activists in India, it is clear that the worldwide recognition and popularity of Mithila art and artists also owes much to the work of anthropologists and folklorists who visited India and took up the case of the women painters. Both Ray Owens and Erica Moser, a German film maker, put enormous effort and determination into setting up a practical and functioning production and international marketing system that allowed the art to prosper. Erica Moser had seen samples of the art in the handicraft outlets in Delhi and spent four months in Jitwarpur studying the art form. She collected up to eighty paintings from surrounding villages such as *Jitwarpur, Ranti, Rahika* and *Rashidpur,* all around Madhubani, taking them back to Germany where they

quickly sold out. Moser returned to the villages with the profits made from the sales and helped the women recognise the potential of their painting and encourage them to work professionally.

(4.2.2) FIGURE - 103 A & B

A – Baua Devi (2008.). *Dashavathar* (The ten avatars of Vishnu). [Acrylic on paper pasted on board, 53.3 x 73.6 cm]. Courtesy of and © The Sarmaya Arts Foundation. Accession number: 2015.2.143

B – Baua Devi (2006). *Kali Mata*. [Acrylic on paper pasted on board, 53.3 x 73.6 cm]. Accession number: 2015.2.142]. Courtesy of Sarmaya Arts Foundation. © Sarmaya Arts Foundation.

Retrieved from: https://sarmaya.in/spotlight/behind-painted-walls-the-story-of-baua-devi-mithila-painting/

Moser used the initial profits to buy land in Jitwarpur and set up a centre for the women artists. She also arranged for Sita Devi to travel to Germany as a featured artist in a major exhibition that she was organizing and curating. The show was to tour a total of seven European nations in two years. Owens also settled in Jitwarpur for an extended period of time as a Fulbright scholar. They

employed the services of Gauri Mishra, a Brahman woman from the region and amongst the first Mithila women to attend university and earn a graduate degree. She became their official language and cultural interpreter. She had lived for many years in the United Kingdom and spoke impeccable English. The result of this varied intervention, as Carolyn Heinz states was that "The combined efforts of Moser and Owens provided this rural village unprecedented and sustained international attention and support" (Heinz, 2006, p. 24).

4.2.3 SONABAI

A chapter that samples vernacular art and artists attaining recognition and empowerment through their work would be incomplete without a look at Sonabai and her legendary painted clay figures. Within the collective tradition of Indian vernacular art, Sonabai's creations embody what is clearly an example of "individual artistic innovation and expression." (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 511). Jain asserts that Sonabai shaped the tradition of Indian vernacular art in her region. Her unique, innovative and sensitive artistic expression far surpassed the inherited artistic traditions of her community. With her individual vision and talent she lifted and shaped the traditional art form of her community to new levels, providing it with powerful new directions and orientation.

Sonabai came from the *Rajwar* community of the district of Sarguja, in the state of Chhattisgarh (previously Madhya Pradesh), south west of Bihar. She was from a village called *Phuhputra* in Sarguja, where the *Rajwars* are farming communities who follow a religious practice of the worship of local Hindu gods as well as dead ancestors. The major festivals celebrated by the Rajwar communities are *Holi, Diwali, Dussehra* and the biggest event of all *Chherta*. Chherta is celebrated in December, on the full moon day of the month, following the harvest season, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). For the celebration of Chherta, the women of the Rajwar community participate in renovating their homes by

repairing damage and white washing the walls as well as adorning them with elaborately crafted clay relief work and wall paintings. Jain asserts that the origins of clay relief art work and painting of homes is unequivocally bound to this Chherta festival. This is where Sonabai first started developing what, according to many sources, is her unique artistic talent, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005); (Huyler, 2008).

(4.2.3) FIGURE - 104 A & B

A – Jyoti Bhatt, (1983). *Sonabai Rajwar's house*. [Silver gelatin print].

B – Jyoti Bhatt, (1983). *Finger-marks pattern on a wall of a Rajwar's house, Madhya Pradesh.* [Silver gelatin print].

Madhya Pradesh, (now Chattisgarh). Courtesy of Museum of Art & Photography and ©Jyoti Bhatt collection.
Retrieved from: http://map-india.org/artwork/sonabai-rajwars-house-madhya-pradesh/

According to Huyler, who spent many years working with Sonabai and her son, Sonabai initially started creating clay figures as a distraction, in order to keep herself company during long hours of loneliness, (Huyler, 2010). While just 12 years old, she was married to Holiram, a wealthy farmer and landowner who had already been married once. Holiram remarried in the hope of having a son, as his first wife did not have any children. About 12 years after her marriage, Sonabai had a son named Daroga Ram, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005). Sonabai found that the clay figures were perfect toys for her young son to play with. See: (4.2.3) FIGURE - 105. There are some discrepancies in accounts as to Sonabai's life after her marriage and the treatment she received from her husband which might have or not contributed to her ingenious artistic production.

Although Jyotindra Jain does not specify these details in so many words, and somewhat contradictorily, even curiously, actually remarks upon the initial lack of interest or curiosity in Sonabai's work from women of the community or the neighbours; in an interview with Maureen Cavanaugh, as well as in his books, Huyler, firmly asserts that Sonabai was forcefully isolated when she started creating her artistic legacy. According to Huyler, probably due to some sort of mental illness, Sonabai's husband deliberately forced her into spending over 15 years in absolute isolation, away from the community, with no contact whatsoever with any members of the society. Holiram was a relatively wealthy man and built a house outside the community, an antisocial and rather unusual practice in India. Huyler asserts that he went on to build a wall around the house so that there were

no windows looking outside. The only exit door out was kept locked. Sonabai was thus effectively isolated from seeing or being seen by anyone and was restricted to an interior courtyard which allowed her to look up to the sky, but nothing else, (Cavanaugh & Burke, 2010); (Huyler S. P., 2008); (Huyler, 2010).

Obviously, if Sonabai was effectively isolated as some sources affirm, it would have been impossible for the neighbours to have known of her artistic endeavours or to have had a chance to contemplate or enjoy them, much less bestow upon them any creative or other value and worthiness. According to Jain's account, it is clear that Sonabai felt isolated and lonely in a rather large house; however, nowhere does he state that this isolation was enforced on her against her will.

> It was a large house, my son was small, my husband was away the whole day and I was terribly lonely. I had no one to talk to. To occupy myself and to have company, I began to construct clay figures of human beings, deities, birds and animals all over the house. They became my companions (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 512).

Eventually, Sonabai's home was filled with a whole array of clay figures of humans, deities, plants, animals, birds and numerous other creatures, all interwoven in representation of real life events as well as mythological and religious stories. See: (4.2.3) FIGURE - 105 and(4.2.3) FIGURE - 106.

(4.2.3) FIGURE - 105 A & B

A – Stephen Huyler (2008). *Details of Sonabai's sculptures,(n.d.).* [Bamboo strips, clay and cow dung]. Courtesy of and ©Stephen Huyler (Huyler S. P., Sonabai, 2008, p. 193) & Abbeville Press Publishers.

B – Jyotindra Jain (1998), *Details of a grain storage jar made by Sonabai, (1977).* [Wood and bamboo armature coated with clay, cow dung and pigment]. Courtesy of ©Jyotindra Jain & Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd. Jacket image of (Jain J. , Other Masters, 1998). Collection of Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

She also began to create hanging screens of lattice work, *(jallies).* Huyler states that although common in Mughal and Rajput architecture, this kind of lattice work is unknown in this part of India. As such he asserts that as Sonabai was illiterate, and had not had access to images, prints or books, as far as the records indicate, it remains a mystery where she ever saw this work in order to

inspire her own creations; or as Huyler suggests, they were in fact exclusively the result of her own personal creative vision and genius, (Huyler S. P., 2008).

Jyotindra Jain also contradicts these assertions by Huyler. In an earlier study, Jain asserts that Rajwar homes typically have open courtyards and verandas from which, as tradition would have, women hang the hardened perforated screens called *jallies* made of structures of bamboo and wood coated with clay. The clay helps harden the wood and bamboo structures thus making them rigid. "The verandas are also the galleries for paintings, clay figures, relief work and ornamental screens made by the women of the house" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 511). See: (4.2.3) FIGURE - 107 and (4.2.3) FIGURE - 108 As mentioned earlier, Jain states that initially Sonabai's creations had little or no impact on either the neighbours, the rest of the Rajwar community or her husband; until she was "discovered" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005).

This assertion by Jyotindra Jain effectively contradicts many of the versions, – including Huyler's, – of Sonabai's forceful isolation during 15 years. It might simply have been the case that the house being isolated and far away from the main village community, added to her husband's dislike of her going out on her own, actually led Sonabai to voluntarily restrain her movements as much as possible, in order to please him and avoid conflict. Whatever the case, Sonabai ingeniously reversed her loneliness and isolation as well as the dearth of toys for her young son. She filled her home with brightly coloured clay figures of musicians, dancers and acrobatic couples. There were mythological and religious

figures such as the flute playing Krishna, newly wedded couples with grooms riding horses and numerous other auspicious trees, plants and animals. All in all, Sonabai created what can only be likened to a vibrantly colourful, rich and breathing kingdom of beings, all within the four walls of what was comparatively a mansion like house in the middle of nowhere. See: (4.2.3) FIGURE - 104 and (4.2.3) FIGURE - 105.

Jain states that although Sonabai's husband did not show much interest or admiration for her work, neither was he averse to her doing it. He was not insistent on her carrying out the usual domestic chores that women were often obliged to do; as such, she was able to give full reign to her creative expression.

> Sonabai remembers that she would get so engrossed in creating clay images for hours that she would not remember to take a break for lunch. To this her husband would always say: "You are all the time busy with clay, can you eat clay?" Sonabai would retort: "Yes, I can eat clay or I need not eat at all, it is not your problem". Her husband did not express any particular admiration for her work but he let her do what she wanted to do. She had a great dislike for routine domestic work such as pounding rice, grinding wheat, cooking or tending cattle and her husband did not insist on her performing these tasks. (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 512).

(4.2.3) FIGURE - 106 A, B & C

A – Jyotindra Jain (1998), *Men climbing a tree by Sonabai, (1977).* [Clay relief work on wall]. Courtesy of ©Jyotindra Jain & Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd. (Jain J. , Other Masters, 1998, p. 54). Collection of Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

B – Jyotindra Jain (1998), *Radha and Krishna by Sonabai, (1995).* [Wood and bamboo armature coated with clay and pigment]. Courtesy of ©Jyotindra Jain & Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd. (Jain J. , Other Masters, 1998, p. 54). Collection of Indira Gandhi National Museum of Man, Bhopal, India.

C – Jyotindra Jain (1998), *Krishna and milk maids, (1977).* [Clay relief work on wall]. Courtesy of ©Jyotindra Jain & Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd. (Jain J. , Other Masters, 1998, p. 49). Collection of Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

(4.2.3) FIGURE - 107 A & B

Inner & outer views of jallie screens in Sonabai's home.
A – Photo courtesy and copyright of Stephen Huyler (Huyler S. P., Sonabai, 2008, p. 190) & Abbeville Press Publishers.

B– Photographs courtesy and copyright of Sahapedia. Retrieved from: https://www.sahapedia.org/saonaabaai-rajavaara-ekaakai-jaivana-aura-sarjanaatamakataafilling-void-creativity-sona-bai-rajwar

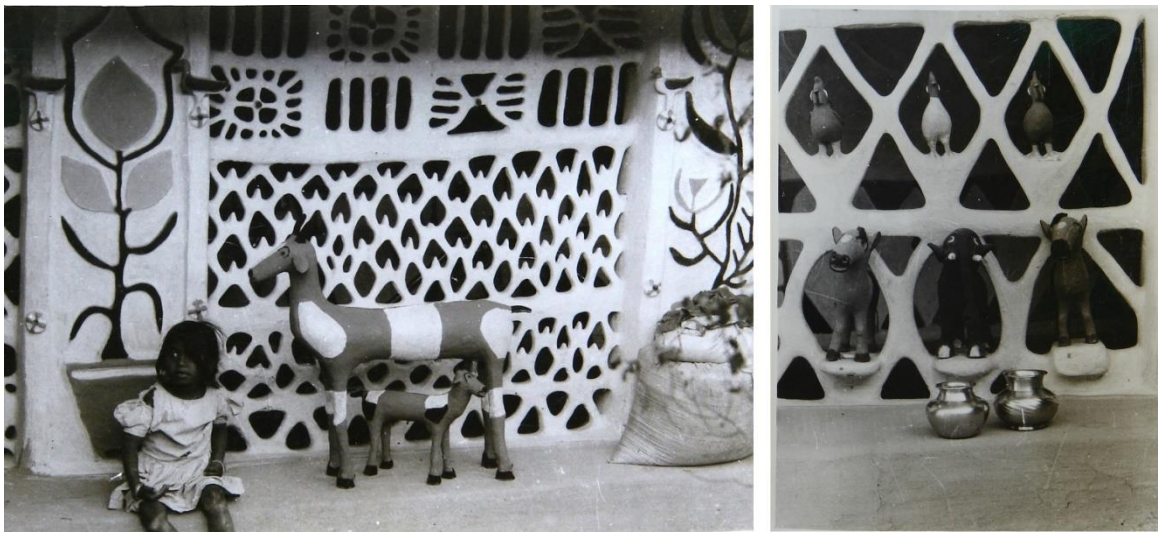
Eventually, in the early 1980s Sonabai was discovered by artists and researchers of Bharat Bhavan, the ambitious multi-arts centre examined further on in this study. Discovery brought her recognition both within India and internationally; numerous prestigious awards, exhibition of her work nationally and internationally as well as monetary rewards in the form of prizes and

commissions. Amongst the awards she has received is *The President's National Award* for crafts persons, which she was awarded in 1983; and the Madhya Pradesh Government's *Tulsi Samman* award, which she received in 1986, (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005); (Huyler S. P., 2008). As recently as November, 2002, she was once again awarded by the president of India, *the Shilip Guru*, "an award for highest excellence as master craftsman" (Huyler, 2010, p. 60).

(4.2.3) FIGURE - 108 A & B

A – Sonabai Rajwar, (n.d.). Sitting in front of one of the interior (*jallie)* lattice screens inside her home.

B – A *jallie* screed based on Sonabai Rajwar's technique, made by artists of the Rajwar community of the *Surguja* region and a wooden carved bench made by the *Muria* community of *Bastar* for the *Gard Kalewa* premises in Raipur, Chattisgarh. [Perforated screens made of structures of bamboo and wood coated with clay]. Photographs courtesy of Sahapedia. Retrieved from: https://www.sahapedia.org/saonaabaai-rajavaara-ekaakai-jaivana-aura-sarjanaatamakataafilling-void-creativity-sona-bai-rajwar



(4.2.3) FIGURE - 109 A & B

Sonabai Rajwar, (1943). Detail of Jallies and sculptures. Photographs courtesy of Sahapedia. Retrieved from: https://www.sahapedia.org/saonaabaai-rajavaara-ekaakai-jaivana-aura-sarjanaatamakataafilling-void-creativity-sona-bai-rajwar

Sonabai was also entrusted with the task of teaching her sculptural technique to 20 local *Chhattisgarhi* artists. She was paid a year's salary by the central government to teach them her artistic style. Huyler states that although the income was very welcome, she was an extremely shy person and as such found the task of instructing people with whom she was not familiar more than challenging. She was to impart several more of these workshops on government income; and was to eventually formally teach a total of twenty artists. Of these artists, five artists have gone on to gain national and international recognition (Huyler S. , 2007).

Both Huyler and Jain assert that recognition and monetary rewards from prizes, sales and commissions of Sonabai's work had a major impact on the

Rajwar community and village. She was said to have "converted mud to gold" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 513). Under the influence of her work and seeing the positive impact, many women in the region began to imitate her art and architectural style, adorning their homes far beyond the conventional manners that were the norm at the time. Huyler states that the art created in the region emulating Sonabai's style is now known as *Surguji* style, after the district of *Surguja*. Jain calls them "Sonabaiesque painted clay figures and relief-work panels" (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 513).

Since the discovery of Sonabai and her art, the general economy and status of both Sonabai's community and nearby villages has greatly improved. Several schools have popped up in the region and her legacy lives on as small groups of artists continue to produce work inspired by Sonabai's particular style and vision, (Vriksha, 2017). Jain further asserts that her creativity, genius and determination as an artist were vital facts in determining her status as a true master who has brought about an artistic revolution in rural Sarguja with relative little media or institutional coverage, backing or marketing.

The impact of Sonabai's work on Rajwar women of her locality has been so powerful that today almost every Rajwar woman of Phuphutara and

(4.2.3) FIGURE - 110 A & B

A – Jyotindra Jain, (n.d.). *Sonabai Rajwar, (n.d.).* Courtesy of ©Jyotindra Jain & Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd. (Jain J. , Other Masters, 1998, p. 46).

B – Stephen Huyler, (n.d.). *Sonabai Rajwar working on jallie screen.* [Bamboo strips, covered in clay and cow dung].Photograph courtesy of and ©Stephen Huyler (Huyler S. P., Sonabai, 2008, p. 194) & Abbeville Press Publishers.

> […] other nearby villages has turned her home into an art gallery – both following her tradition and innovating new forms. […] In the context of the much-celebrated notion of anonymity of traditional Indian artists, which is more of a construct than cultural reality, the case of Sonabai is a revelation. To most of the organised art-world of India she belongs to the faceless,

> collective tradition of Sarguja clay work but for those within her society she was individualistic from the beginning and is recognised among them as a great creative force which has influenced the entire community. She revitalised and built upon an inherited collective tradition and thereby initiated and established her own tradition which again became a `collective´ tradition – but with a difference. […] The sheer magnitude, range and innovative quality of her work pursued over a lifetime make Sonabai a highly distinguished woman artist of India (Jain, Ray, & Chattopadhyaya, 2005, p. 514).

Sonabai passed away in her late 70s, on August 17, 2007, from what by all indications appeared to have been a stroke, (Huyler S. P., 2010).

4.3 – Women Driving the Engine of the Economy

> We not only want a piece of the pie, we also want to choose the flavour, and know how to make it ourselves
>
> Ela Bhatt, (as cited in Rose, 1982, p. 14).

In order to raise the profile of the Mithila women artists internationally, during an extended number of years Gauri Mishra and Eric Moser focused on the European markets, while Ray Owens dedicated his efforts to the United States. They set up the Master Craftswomen Association Centre on land donated by Erica Moser specifically for that purpose, and worked pointedly towards the recognition and professionalising of the artists and their work; increasing their income by eliminating the intermediaries who earned large profits, while also training women with necessities who were interested in taking up the profession.

A few years later, on returning to the United States Owens founded the *Ethnic Art Foundation* as an agency through which to promote and market folk art from a range of developing countries. According to Carolyn Heinz, although "the benefits of the international spotlight were quickly apparent in Jitwarpur and the region" (Heinz, 2006, p. 24), over the years the endeavour has not provided a smooth ride for the women, neither has it got a happy ending, free of problems.

Even though it is clear that some of the women artists were enjoying the fruit of their personal connections with Ray Owens, who had been a patron of their art for several years, "the vast majority were still deeply impoverished" (Heinz, 2006, p. 24). Differences in opinions regarding the marketing of the work arouse between Owens and Mishra amongst other issues that complicated the process.

Ray Owens originally initiated his commercial relationship with the Mithila artists agreeing to pay them a fixed amount per painting. He would then take the paintings to the United States, sell the artwork and return fifty percent of the profit from sales to the artists back home in Jitwarpur. Previous to this, when they first began painting on paper, artists would receive between 5.00 and 15.00 rupees per piece; – exchange rates in the 1970s were approximately 7.50 Indian rupees to 1.00 US dollar – (N.S.S.Narayan, Parikh, & Srinivasan, 1991). Indian buyers who bought the paintings for the above amounts would then sell them in Delhi for prices between Rs. 50.00 to Rs 350, thus making huge profits on them, none of which was shared with the artists. Bhaskar Kulkarni who had originally made contact with the artists through Pupul Jayakar was now part of the Handicraft and Handloom Export Corporation. He also bought the paintings paying according to size, between Rs 5.00 for the smaller pieces and Rs 20.00 for larger pieces that measured approximately 50 x 70 cm.

The prices of the paintings of the more skilled artists began to rise and artists who had been earning between Rs 50.00 and 60.00 per piece in the 1970s began to receive amounts over Rs 100.00 for large pieces. By this time, paintings

bought from the artists for Rs. 50.00 by local intermediaries would be sold in Delhi for more than Rs 250.00. (Heinz, 2006).

In an attempt to ensure that the artists received a bigger and fairer proportion of the profits from the sales of their work, Owens arranged with the artists to buy the pieces at a fixed rate and return fifty percent of the sales made in the United States back to them. Gautam Vohra outlines the example of Lalita Devi from Simri; a village in Bihar located about 300 km southeast of Jitwarpur. Lalita Devi initially received Rs 15.00 for her paintings of scenes from the Mahabharata. Owens offered her Rs. 25.00 per painting, out-rightly buying fifteen paintings from her in one transaction. He went on to sell them all in an exhibition in the United States, finally sending her a further Rs 700.00, which in no uncertain terms constituted a fortune, as per the situation and standards in the villages at the time. (Vohra, 1988). By the 1980s, the prices of the paintings and art work in general from that region had inflated significantly and greatly benefited the specific artists whose work was considered artistically rich and to certain extents the villages themselves. One can safely conclude that as a result of "the efforts of Moser, Owens, Gauri Mishra, and organizations like the Master Craftswomen's Association, the women artists had learned to negotiate higher prices for their work" (Heinz, 2006, p. 24)

By this time, Gauri Mishra had taken up the role of the regional intermediary or development agent between the talented, but impoverished women artists and the international market from where the greatest demand for the

paintings came. The *Master Craftswomen's Association* was the official body through which the business was run. The association was able to acquire sponsorship to further expand its work from various organisations, amongst them the Ford Foundation. However, both Gauri Mishra and representatives from the foundation realized that although some of the artists were enjoying the fruits of their paintings, mainly it would seem as a result of their close ties with Owens who dealt directly with them; most were still abjectly poor, despite the progress achieved in marketing the paintings. Jitwarpur had come to be known as "Owens' village" (Heinz, 2006, p. 26), as such, while most of the other regions around Bihar continued to struggle, suffering from dire conditions and impoverishment, "access to the American market for Mithila art was monopolized by Jitwarpur" (Heinz, 2006, p. 26).

Gauri Mishra saw the painting and art created by Mithila women as an example of just one amongst many other potential means of helping appease the poverty of women of all casts as well as fuel economic development in the region. She attempted to extend the development possibilities by moving the Master Craftsmen's Association out of Jitwarpur as a possible way of helping other areas of the region. However, her decision was met with great resistance from the people of Jitwarpur, who were highly reluctant to relinquish the privileges of being *Owens' Village*. This lead to the need for her to be escorted by the police as she moved the MCA headquarters to a more central location in Bihar (Heinz, 2006). Mishra went so far as to get a court order against Ray Owens, accusing

him of theft and bypassing the association by buying art work directly from the artists and not paying 25% into the MCA. The issue of whether Owens had an acquired right to trade directly with the artists or an obligation to go through the Association was never resolved, (Heinz, 2006); (Vohra, 1988). Heinz asserts that, after this turn of affairs Owens did not return to the region and his relationship with the artists and Jitwarpur disappeared. However, according to the *Ethnics Art foundation*, which was set up around about this time by Owens and other colleagues, it would appear that Owens ties with Madhubani art and Jitwarpur were far from severed.[111]

Gauri Mishra later went on to set up the Madhubani branch of SEWA *(Self-Employed Women's Association* in July 1984. Before the end of the year she had acquired a grant of 22,000 rupees from *Oxfam America*. I shall go into the SEWA movement and its work further ahead in this study. During her visit to Mithila in July 1984, Carolyn Heinz observed what she expressed as "a dazzling array of activities" (Heinz, 2006, p. 26), being undertaken under the supervision of Gauri Mishra and her collaborators. Mishra carefully selected a small group of women artists who did not come from the traditional *Brahman* or *Kayasthas* casts, which made up the original Madhubani women painters, and offered them what was akin

[111] For more information and images of current Mithila paintings, please visit: https://ethnicartsfoundation.com/about/

to a salaried position earning Rs. 200 per month for their painting. The paintings were marketed by SEWA Madhubani, and a savings scheme was set up in the same vein as a banking system with passbooks to help the women protect their earnings; preventing them from being seized by their menfolk, many of whom were and are jobless and alcoholic loiterers.

To a certain extent, Gauri Mishra's efforts through SEWA have ensured that a real market for Mithila Art has emerged at a national level, amongst the growing middle classes of India; while internationally, Jitwarpur has gained a reputation which has converted it into an exhibition village for visitors from around the world.

> SEWA Mithila in Madhubani, Bihar concentrates on income generation for women painters […]. It has around 5000 workers who have transferred their traditional skill if painting ceremonial designs on house walls to paper and cloth. Several nationally acclaimed artisans have achieved recognition through SEWA Mithila's market networking of their paintings and calendars, which command a lucrative market as far away as Europe and the US. They also design beautiful saris, pillows and other garments on locally produced tassar silk. This SEWA is run as an economic unit largely beholden to the painters' dynamic leader, Gauri Mishra. […] Though years ago their work was virtually undiscovered, it is quite usual to see a SEWA painter at every major crafts exhibition in the country today (Rose, 1992, p. 258).

According to Neel Rekha, over the years Mithila artists have started shifting their focus from wholly traditional and non-political narratives to themes dealing with gender issues, human and civil rights other social issues as well as religious extremism, communal riots, terrorist attacks and global warming. A few men have also joined the women as artists and changes in the traditional themes and visual aesthetics have affected the way in which Madhubani tradition is perceived and understood today, both by the artists themselves as well as the surrounding infrastructure of curators, academics, promoters, galleries, and consumers.

(Rekha, 2010).

Several films produced over the years by different scholars have successfully maintained Madhubani art and artists in the forefront of international markets, whilst also supporting the argument regarding the valid classification of vernacular art as mainstream contemporary art. Scholars, filmmakers and writers who include Raymond Lee Owens and Joseph Elder from the University of Wisconsin in USA, Erica Moser the German anthropologist and Yves Vequaud the French scholar have written books and made films which have clearly helped to maintain not only the aesthetic and commercial interest for Madhubani art and culture but also growing academic interest.

Sometime in the late 1980s and early 90s Japanese art lovers began to take an interest in Madhubani art. In 1996, Jitwarpur received a visit from a Japanese film crew who paid the villages to paint while they filmed. As a result, the entire

village is now covered in wall decorations; paintings appeared in places where they had never been seen before. This visit from the film crew and the Japanese musician Tokio Hasegawa laid the foundations for the Mithila Art Museum which was set up in Japan by Hasegawa. Since then, artists have been offered payment to travel to Japan and spend stretches of time creating paintings that include a variety of themes both based on daily life, contemporary themes as well as Hindu religious mythology.

At about the same time, Raymond Lee Owens, David Szanton and other scholars also set up the *Ethnics Art Foundation (EAF),* which I have already mentioned previously. The EAF with its headquarters in Berkeley, California, is a non-profitmaking organization which aims to expand and further promote knowledge and appreciation of Mithila paintings, through research as well as written and media documentation. Many of the films about the painting process, the history and the life histories of the artists themselves, have been largely produced by scholars and anthropologists from outside India and funded by academic institutions or other sources, also outside India. These can be viewed free of charge at the EAF online site, (EAF, 1980). The EAF is still a highly active supporter and promoter of Mithila Art. It continues to organise exhibitions, cultural encounters, publish documents and hold lectures. In 2003 the Mithila Art Institute was established in Madhubani. A central hub for Mithila Art, it is also a free art school which strives to maintain and encourage interest amongst younger generation artists in learning the age old painting techniques.

Carolyn Brown Heinz further adds that Mithila art has also "become a class marker for middle class girls from professional and business families in more urban Darbhanga" (Heinz, 2006, p. 31); which is located in the North of Bihar. Heinz cites the example of Chhabi Jha, whose family traditions would not have approved of women working or earning an income outside the home, but who is now one of the many teachers of Mithila art, offering classes to young wives in their courtyards and rooftops. At the same time, Heinz asserts that

> Women are developing a discourse about this art and teaching it to young women […]. Some of this will come from Mithila University, where a chair has been established for Mithila Art Studies. It will also come from the rapid expansion of the education of women, who are now learning rhetorical arts as well as visual ones. There is much still to be said about the women's art, and finally the women will say it", (Heinz, 2006, p. 31).[112]

[112] For further details please visit: http://mithila.syr.edu/Video.html

4.3.1 SEWA – SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

In December 1971, a Women Workers' Association which came to be known as SEWA, The Self Employed Women's Association was founded in Ahmedabad; the largest city in the western state of Gujarat. The term *sewa or seva* literally translates to *"service"* in most languages derived from Sanskrit. SEWA initially originated from the *Textile Labour Association,* (TLA), one of India's oldest and largest textile workers' trade unions, founded in 1920 by Anasuya Sarabhai.[113] Sarabhai was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi with whom she had worked hand in hand during his leadership position in the 1917 strike of textile mill workers, (Byrne, 1984).

In his incessant struggle to uphold workers' rights, Gandhi believed that raising awareness amongst workers using positive organised movements was fundamental to success. He taught that in order to achieve the unity required to resist exploitation, the union of members needed to cover all aspects of workers' lives, both at home and in the factory. Thus the first seeds of feminism planted by Anasuya Sarabhai and Gandhi's holistic ideology formed the roots of SEWA; which has now become one of the biggest registered women's trade unions.

[113] Please visit: http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_History.asp

In 1954, Gandhi's philosophy promoting active engagement in local and national politics alongside industrial relations and social work led to the creation of the *Women's Wing* of the Textile Labour Association. The original function of the Women's Wing of TLA was to support the wives and other women folk of the mill workers of the textile industry, by providing them with training in new skills and other welfare activities. As a result of this initiative, within a few years the wives and daughters of mill workers were engaged in a wide variety of income generating economic activities such as knitting, embroidery, sewing, spinning typing, and stenography, to mention a few. As might have been predicted this economic activity also led to the full blown exploitation of these women workers by contractors. Many of the women earned a pittance for endless days of work while living on the streets without any semblance of shelter or housing.

In 1971, one of the contractors approached Ela Bhatt the head of the women's wing of TLA, to draw her attention to the problem. Ela Bhatt went all out to resolve the issues. She published articles that highlighted the exploitation of the women workers by merchants who in turn retaliated by also publishing articles denying the accusation and claiming that there was no exploitation. Ela Bhatt used these claims to hold the contractors and merchants accountable, forcing them to fulfil their testimonies of fair treatment and appropriate economic compensations. As news of what was occurring spread, a public meeting was held. Ela Bhatt and the president of TLA, Arvind Buch, established SEWA in December 1971; in response to the appeals of the attendees of the meeting. In

April 1972, SEWA went on to be formally registered as a Trade Union of self-employed women workers, (Datta, 2003).

As Kalima Rose states,

> under SEWA, women have forged a new model of what a trade union can be […] which defies conventional concepts about who unions organize and what they do or their members.[…] there are very few unions in the world which are devoted entirely to female membership. SEWA organises women who work in their homes, in the streets of cities, in the fields and villages of rural India, with no fixed employer, carving their small niches in economy, day by day, with only their wits to guide them against incredible odds of vulnerability, invisibility and poverty (Rose, 1992, p. 16).

John Blaxall, a *World Bank* Consultant, has defined SEWA as a movement firmly aimed at empowering women living in poverty and working in informal sectors of the market; helping them achieve security and independence in employment. Blaxall asserts that SEWA functions on "firmly democratic procedures […] based explicitly on Gandhian principles," (Blaxall, 2004, p. 1). All endeavours carried out by SEWA stem from the necessities of members who have through the organisation succeeded in empowering and organizing themselves in order to fight for their rights and improve their economic prospects. They have succeeded in joining forces to increase their incomes through the force of collective pressure and have also managed to create alternative income

generating opportunities. Through SEWA, women have accessed and opened up previously unavailable information and markets while also getting help with business strategies and marketing, as well as micro banking and credit facilities. This has opened up new pathways for these women to build businesses as well as assets and thus achieve self-reliance.

> SEWA's successful efforts have mobilized large numbers of poor self-employed women for empowerment. From small beginnings in 1972, as a group of poor, illiterate women working as casual laborers [sic] in the wholesale textile markets, SEWA's membership has grown to 535,000 in its home state of Gujarat, and to around 700,000 throughout India. The annual rate of membership growth has averaged between 25 percent and 35 percent in each of the past three five-year periods (Blaxall, 2004, p. 1).

There is more than adequate documentation which indicates that during the early days, when Pupul Jayakar was actively involved in introducing Indian traditional arts to the global market, the government of India took an active interest in collaborating towards that objective;

> The early foundational figures had worked in synch with a farsighted political class and bureaucracy, who backed their initiatives. From Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, there was the recognition that the arts and crafts, the second largest sector of

> employment in India after agriculture, were not only an invaluable cultural asset but, equally an economic force (Sethi R. , 2012, p. 173).

However, after the late 1980s, as Sethi states, it would seem that "government institutions became less responsive to the needs of craftspeople" (Sethi R. , 2012, p. 173). Political priorities changed towards the direction of what could be considered as an absolute focus and commitment to urban, industrial and digital growth; "crafts and craftspeople were now relegated to the backwaters" (Sethi R. , 2012, p. 173). What stands out clearly is that instead of recognizing the value of this sector as a powerhouse of economic activity contributing to gross domestic product; government policy makers shifted their focus entirely while at the same time dismissing the sector as a sunset industry worthy only of minimal subsidies from government budgets.

This brought about the urgent question of how to equip and empower the artists and workers in these sectors, especially the women, and prepare them for the changing times that were already visible. Although there was a growing middleclass population that sought and paid for goods to feed their increasingly comfortable lifestyles, there was also an increasingly greater divide between the urban and rural populations. Globalization, the opening up of the Indian markets and economy to foreign trade and increasing competition was not benefiting the traditional and rural sectors of India. As Sethi so eloquently states, in the circumstances and times that prevailed,

> a new generation of activists matured; their direction, both a response and reaction to the shifts in circumstances confronting craftspeople. Mandated to empower and improve the economic and social status of craftspeople, pan-India and regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) heralded a new wave of women from dissimilar backgrounds who, drawn to the sector, had a pulse for its needs and changing priorities. Working to create sustainable economic models and, equally significantly, going beyond economics to fulfil social development agendas, these NGOs focused on a wide range of actions. Measures included seeking sustainable employment, collectivisation, generating income, economic self-sufficiency and social equity – all human development aspirations (Sethi R. , 2012, p. 175).

Without a doubt, SEWA successfully offered the possibility of empowerment for women from diverse backgrounds and social standings, opening up opportunities for them to acquire control over their lives in a way that had previously been inaccessible. Elisabeth Armstrong asserts that feminism in Asia was defined by three different strands, social reform feminism that was shaped by colonial relations and pursued improved access to education, health care and social welfare without actually challenging "existing power hierarchies, […] they sought to alleviate the suffering generated by inequalities" (as cited in Boris, 2017, p. 87). Nationalist feminism aimed to acquire equal rights, political inclusion and full participation for women in public life while leftist feminism

focused on “political, social, cultural and economic restructuring” (as cited in Boris, 2017, p. 87). SEWA has successfully incorporated features of all three strategies of empowerment (Boris, 2017).

4.3.2 THE BAREFOOT COLLEGE

Sanjit Bunker Roy's brainchild, the *Barefoot College*, – officially registered as *The Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC)* – is perhaps one of the world's most exemplary cases of successful implementation of grass-root entrepreneurial strategies that has led to real empowerment and sustainability in rural communities. Here, the people involved, especially the women are actively in control of developing skills and projects that contribute to empowerment and improved quality of life all round, (Elkington & Hartigan, 2008); (Barefoot College, 1972). Although not limited to activism through art and artists, the exemplary model that is promoting development and achievements which are contributing to empowerment and progress at truly unprecedented levels, make for a necessary look at Sanjit Bunker Roy's solution to equality, progress, growth and empowerment at all levels.

Sanjit Bunker Roy was the son of an upper middleclass family, who in his own words "received the most elitist, expensive, snobbish private education that any Indian could possibly receive" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 70); (Roy, 2011). In 1967, as a young postgraduate, Roy went to volunteer with famine victims in what at the time was one of the poorest states of India. He lived and worked in Tilonia, a rural village in the district of Ajmer, Rajasthan, in North West India. He recounts the experience as being "life-changing" (Barefoot College, 1972, p. 2).

This was clearly the source of an inspiration which blossomed into his "personal mission to fight poverty and inequality" (Barefoot College, 1972, p. 2). This mission has led to what is today an international organisation with centres in India, Africa and Latin America. The Barefoot College is an organisation which is quite literally "disrupting poverty" (Barefoot College, 1972).

When Bunker first arrived in *Tilonia*, he encountered a village inhabited by elders, abandoned by younger generations; a village where all the youth had left for the cities. The value system at the time debased rural life and the traditional skills or occupations, thus forcing the younger generations to abandon their communities in search of opportunity, taking with them useless qualifications that would woefully fail to fulfil their high aspirations and dreams of success and prosperity, (Roy & Hartigan, 2008). Roy and Hartigan state that the vast majority of the youth who flooded the cities from the villages of India clutched valueless certificates "from uninspiring mediocre technical institutes and colleges located in small towns producing "graduates" by the thousands" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 70).

Young people graduated in vast numbers every year from these institutes. They held degrees as certified doctors, teachers and engineers, but they were "paper experts", with no practical skills in the fields in which they were supposed to practise. Roy and Hartigan assert that although these young people carried with them high hopes and big dreams of getting well-paid secure jobs in the cities, they were unemployable; "instead, they swelled the ranks of the educated

unemployables living in the slums in India" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 70). The paper degrees they held were valueless, these certified, qualified doctors; teachers and engineers had no practical skills or experience.

> They are caught up in a system that is not accountable to the people it is supposed to serve and produces insufficient jobs to absorb the number of job seekers. Civil engineers build roads that do not last; water engineers build tanks that collapse or crack or deplete the water resources and cannot be used; doctors focus on curative approaches and know little or nothing about preventive health. So in the absence of jobs but still hoping for any job, they live an inhuman existence in appalling urban slums (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 70).

The youth who depart in such huge numbers to the cities in search of a brighter future do not ever dare return to their villages for fear of the shame, humiliation and scorn that they and their families would face from being deemed as failures. As such, they almost never return and with them they take the possibilities and hopes of their parents, skilled in traditional trades as weavers, blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, farmers; of ever being able to maintain their traditional skills alive by passing them on to future generations. These skills that the youth left behind alongside their families, made up the invaluable knowledge and abilities that the older generations had acquired in order to adapt to local rural conditions and circumstances; knowledge and skills that were not valued by any

type of formal education system, but that all the same were invaluable to the self-respect, dignity and above all development of the communities.

Bunker spent five years, from 1967 till 1971, to use his own words, "living and working in the villages […] as an unskilled labourer digging and blasting wells" (as cited in Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 71). He recounts this experience as being extraordinary, and one that led him to "unlearn" much of what he had believed to be true, previous to the experience.

> I went through an "unlearning" process that provided the seeds for the humble beginning of the Barefoot College (see Box 1). Over the last 35 years, what we have "unlearned" is our gross underestimation of people's infinite capacity to identify and solve their own problems with their own creativity and skills, and to depend on each other in tackling problems. What I learned is that empowerment is about developing that capacity to solve problems, to make choices, and to have the confidence to act on them (as cited in Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 71).

By 1974, the Barefoot College began to take concrete form, as Bunker's wife Aruna, gave up her job with the Indian Administrative service, so as to dedicate time to becoming a full member of the Tilonia team. Alongside Bunker and his wife, Manya Jayaram, Yogavalli Rao and Shukla Kanungo, all from the *Tata Institute of Social Sciences* in Mumbai also joined forces with them. Their initial projects were to put together a health care program on basic preventive care

and measures; and to set up the now well-known Informal Education Program which consisted in running night schools for children who had dropped out of school for diverse reasons. Most of these children lost the opportunity to continue with their schooling as they were pulled out of day schools in order to carry out tasks that were all too often essential for the survival of the family.

At the same time the experience of setting up and running the college led Bunker and the other members of the team to understand some of the more intangible but unique and specific needs of the rural poor, which was to assert themselves through their identity, knowledge and skills; as unequivocally relevant and pertinent to the times and circumstances. The rural communities needed to gradually rebuild their sense of belonging, self-esteem, self-respect and ownership; a task that the Barfoot College not only helped them achieve, but in the process, also managed to highlight and raise awareness as regards much of the ignorance and arrogance of the formal education system. An elitist system which likes to believe that it forms part of an indispensable process to tackle poverty, when quite often the strategies being employed by this formal educative system actually misfire; are counterproductive or even dangerous, (Roy & Hartigan, 2008).

The Barefoot College claims that it is the only college in India that is faithful to the Gandhian philosophy of work and lifestyle. Bunker and Hartigan stress that ever since its beginnings, almost 50 years ago, it remains the only college in India that was built by the poor for the poor; and which continues to be

run, managed, controlled and owned by the poor. The Barefoot College's steadfast belief that contributes to maintaining this approach is tied to their absolute faith and recognition that tapping into the "knowledge, creativity, practical wisdom, and survival skills of the rural poor" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 72); is "possibly the only answer to making communities self-reliant and sustainable" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 72).

As such, the Barefoot College implemented what is unquestionably a novel and revolutionary strategy. The vital services of the village, which are usually provided by formally qualified doctors, teachers and water engineers with their respective paper qualifications, were offered to the rural, unemployed, semi-literate youth who were normally considered unemployable. Candidates for training were and are chosen according to their eagerness to listen and learn; their flexibility and capacity to adapt and work with all segments of society; their practical and creative skills; their honesty and compassion, as well as their lack of prejudice or discriminatory attitudes.

The ultimate objective of the system provided by the Barefoot College is to offer the training necessary to create communities with people who are equipped with the necessary skills to offer vital services to their own societies and communities while also maintaining their own traditional, knowledge and sustainable lifestyles. "By giving the rural poor access to practical technology, Barefoot College demystifies technology and puts it in the hands of the villagers themselves" (Bunker Roy as cited in Castonguay, 2009, para.6).

The Barefoot College claims to be amongst the few institutions in India which continue to uphold Gandhian teachings and philosophy. Gandhi firmly advocated placing priority on upholding and promoting traditional knowledge and practical skills in resolving the common everyday issues that arise within societies; as being fundamental to the development and progress of rural Indian communities. "Gandhi's thoughts live on in the Barefoot College. Living conditions for everyone are simple and down to earth (literally!). Everyone sits, eats, and works on the floor. No one can receive a salary of over $150 a month" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 73). In this manner, the Barefoot College, takes into account the needs and desires of the rural communities, raising awareness amongst them of the value and importance of their own problem solving skills, talent and the often intangible resources that they have inherited from generation to generation; emphasizing the irreplaceable experience that contributes towards successfully facing the specific challenges that come with living in particular geographical conditions as well as other circumstances which are unique to each area.

> The focus of the college is to make the young men, women, and children living in the village aware of this precious resource so that eventually they will stay in their villages and not migrate to the cities to end up living in a slum (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 73).

As a result of this philosophy, the College offers the rural communities access to an education that would normally be completely inaccessible to them; an education that helps members of these communities build their sense of self - confidence, reliability and competence. Young men and women who are barely literate, semiliterate or completely illiterate are the only candidates selected to attend the Barefoot Collage programs. These are youth who would not be able to get even the lowest hierarchy government or private sector job.

> Over the last 35 years, thousands of unemployed and unemployable rural poor have been selected and trained as barefoot educators and technologists. […] They have been trained as "barefoot" educators, doctors, teachers, engineers, architects, designers, communicators, hand pump mechanics, and accountants. They have demonstrated that "experts" from the urban areas with paper qualifications are not really required to make villages self-sufficient and sustainable because these trained "barefoot" experts can do the work themselves (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, pp. 73-74).

The philosophical principles of the Barefoot College education system are very firmly rooted in the ideas of self-reliance, transparency and decentralization. In the first college in Tilonia, a full time director works with a team of colleagues; each fully responsible and independently in charge of a different sector. The person responsible for each sector only consults with her or his colleagues as she or he deems fit and necessary; also independently managing their own budget and

bank account. Monthly meetings are held with the director and people responsible for the different field centres and sectors in order to assess the progress and work realized, draw conclusions and evaluate issues that need to be addressed as well as the next steps to be taken. Problems of coordination between sections are addressed and minutes are recorded and distributed amongst everyone present in the meetings.

The field centres are located in villages surrounding Tilonia, in Rajasthan. All the field centres are based in villages where they have their own campuses and teams made up of a coordinator and field workers who design, manage and implement the initiatives collectively, with the village community. Each field centre involves 15 to 25 villages. These collectively lead the initiatives taken, endorsing their implementation in the monthly meetings that are held. The members of the committees are women and men who are amongst the poorest members of the villages. The members of the committees have financial power and three members of each committee jointly operate the bank accounts. All affiliate Barefoot Colleges make use of this decentralized, collective decision making process, while collectively initiating, planning and managing their community projects. The Barefoot Collage also places great importance on transparency and accountability.

> It is the only grassroots organization in India that holds public hearings and shares usually confidential financial information with the community of all those associated with its work. This information includes the sources of

> funding, the amounts received, and the ways funds are spent. Staff bank accounts are also published. The organizations associated with the Barefoot College family believe we are accountable to funding agencies and to the community in whose name the funds are received. All audit statements are open to the public (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 74).

As mentioned previously, due to this highly progressive, transparent, inclusive and non-divisive approach which wields highly tangible and palpable results, the Barefoot Collage philosophy has been embraced and replicated not only in numerous places all over India, but also in several parts of the world.

> So far, 20 colleges have been established in 13 states of India. In keeping with the Barefoot philosophy, each operates independently, defining its own curriculum but keeping a few non-negotiable tenets at the core of their operations:
>
> Equality. All people in the college are equal regardless of gender, caste, ethnicity, age, and schooling. In practical terms, this means the college has no hierarchy. The founder and director of a college have the same say and status as the new barefoot accountant who has just joined it and the physically challenged barefoot operator who answers the phone.
>
> Austerity. Everyone in the college receives a living wage, not a market wage. The maximum wage anyone can earn is U.S. $150/month; the

> minimum is about half that at 73 Indian rupees per day. Living conditions focus on basic needs and are designed to minimize waste.
>
> Collective Decision-Making. Decisions are made collectively, not by individuals in isolation. For example, the salary each person receives is decided on by everyone in the organization; the process is based on a points system in which each person evaluates himself and everyone else according to several criteria (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 75).

Bunker asserts that the timing of the 1970s was just right to allow for the construction of an institution with a different philosophy that tore apart the elitist attitudes of academic institutions that is the norm. He especially emphasizes the need to continue to raise awareness and to "demonstrate the value, importance, and relevance of traditional knowledge, village skills and the practical wisdom of the poor" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 75). The first Barefoot College campus in Tilonia was built in just two years by the same rural and semiliterate poor who it trained. Twelve barefoot architects learnt to adapt and apply their traditional skills and knowledge to the challenge of building a modern space while also incorporating traditional and rural tools and technologies. The main campus was built under the guidance of Bhanwar Jat, an illiterate farmer in Tilonia and twenty village masons. The campus is made up of 2800 square metres of buildings and 35000 square meters of land cost $21000 to finish.

The details that went into building this first campus are evidence of the ingenious skills, wisdom and abilities of the rural population. The philosophy that guided and governed the team throughout the construction and as they worked on this project was based on Gandhi's teachings "that there is a difference between literacy and education" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 76). This is and was applied to everything that went on within the campuses. The traditional and familiar skills and techniques of resolving challenges which are passed down through generations and are learnt from living and working in these communities were applied at every step. Sketches and plans were refined and redrawn again and again on the grounds while traditional building techniques and specific site issues were resolved and agreed collectively.

Even the length and depth of walls and floor spaces were measured in the traditional way using the arms and hands of those present and the unit called *hath*. The hath is approximately 45 cm. equivalent more or less to the length of an arm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. The college community included men and women engineers, mechanics, traditional artists and puppeteers, masons, midwives and night school teachers. They all firmly agreed that in order to live and work together in the college; they all had to participate in the design and shaping of the ideas and concepts that went into the building of the collage, as well as actually constructing it.

As such, the buildings are situated in the traditionally highly elaborate and decorative courtyards, facing the direction of wind so as to maintain the natural

cooling and circulatory systems that have been employed traditionally to combat the searing summer heats. Traditional building and waterproofing materials and techniques were used and as far as is known, the buildings are intact and have not leaked except in the case of exceptionally heavy rains.

> The Barefoot architects demonstrated that it was possible to use traditional knowledge, local materials, and village skills. In the process, they showed how relevant and important their practical wisdom was for preserving and conserving the architectural skills that had been disappearing from most traditional communities. With great foresight, the Barefoot architects connected the roofs of all the buildings to collect rainwater in a 400,000-liter *[sic]* underground tank. This was quite remarkable in the late 1980s, when many professional architects were still ignorant about the importance of collecting rainwater as part of their basic designs. Seating for 2,000 people was constructed over the tank; it overlooks a stage where performances (puppet shows, street theatre, musical evenings) are held regularly (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 77).

Significantly, the Barefoot College model has highlighted the importance and relevance of using traditional knowledge, wisdom and skills; alongside local materials and labour to conserve the identity, traditions and heritage of rural communities. This traditional knowledge comprises a major part of the identity of these groups, which is in continuous danger of disappearing. When applied to

resolve modern day challenges, as in the Barefoot College model, we can unarguably state the case that true development, progress and solutions are being promoted and achieved.

The ingenuity of the wisdom within these populations can be demonstrated by the foresight that was shown when designing the roofs of the campus buildings. The roofs of all the buildings were connected so as to collect rainwater in an underground tank with a capacity of 400,000 litres. "This was quite remarkable in the late 1980s, when many professional architects were still ignorant about the importance of collecting rainwater as part of their basic designs. Seating for 2,000 people was constructed over the tank" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 77).

Geodesic dome structures were fabricated from discarded agricultural products such as old tools, bullock carts, pumps etc. They helped alleviate the problem of deforestation caused by scarcity of wood while providing the spaces required to house the laboratories, meeting halls, store rooms, internet café and other areas of the college. Similar domes are also being used in the deserts for different purposes where they have helped benefit hundreds of communities; in the Himalayas the domes are being used to collect 200,000 litres of rain water annually, (Roy & Hartigan, 2008). Roy asserts that the Barefoot College is the only college in India which is completely solar powered; where the college engineers installed 40 kilowatts of solar panels with five battery banks containing 136 deep-cycle batteries and other related components, all fabricated in 1989; within the college itself by their own locally trained engineers and technicians.

> Barefoot focuses inward on building itself, but it is primarily focused outward, to help rural communities thrive with dignity and self-respect. This involves community input based on assessment of their priority needs. Currently, Barefoot is focusing on six areas: education, drinking water, alternative energy, the environment, empowering rural women, and traditional communication (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 78).

Barefoot College night schools have been established in Rajasthan and six states of India, Assam, Orissa, Uttaranchal, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. Barefoot teachers are selected and trained by the members of the rural communities where the night schools are located. They are often young unemployed rural men and women who are selected and trained to teach at pre-primary levels in the night schools. The selected teachers participate in a 30-day residential training camp, where they learn to impart skills as well as design and participate fully in the creation of curriculums that are "directed at practical learning that fits local circumstances and builds on local knowledge" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 78).

Currently there is a network made up of more than 450 barefoot teachers providing educational access to almost 8000 children, of which 6000 are girls. The night school program is made up of 150 schools which are attended by 3000 boys and girls, mostly from shepherd families who are unable to attend school during the day and are often attending for the first time in their lives. All the educational material used in the schools such as chalk, blackboards, seating mats

as well as science and other teaching aids are fabricated by the rural youth with disabilities. The night schools are coordinated by the colleges collectively through the different affiliates and community based voluntary organizations in the six states mentioned previously; while the Rajasthan night schools are coordinated by the Barefoot College in Tilonia.

The Barefoot College approach as a breakthrough has proved to be a more than valid approach that can be applied and replicated in any part of the world. Roy Hartigan recounts how in the first experiments with expanding outside of India, three sheep farmers from Agrisewal, a small village in Marrakech, Morocco were chosen to visit the Barefoot College in Tilonia to be trained as solar engineers. They did not speak English or any Indian languages, only Berber and French. Yet, in approximately only six months they were successfully trained as barefoot solar engineers using only sign language, dedication and the will to learn. They were able to install 100 solar units in the Himalayas in India before returning to apply their skills back home. The experiment showed clearly that when the correct approach is applied "language, religion, food habits, climate, caste and creed are not barriers to learning" (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 89).

There are currently more than 340 rural men and women from eight different countries in Asia, Africa and South America who have been trained as barefoot solar engineers. They have brought electricity to approximately 550 schools and 13,000 homes in more than 600 villages worldwide. They have assembled and put together more than 10,000 solar powered home lighting

installations as well as 4,400 solar lanterns with a total installed capacity of approximately 646 kilowatts.

In Ethiopia six rooftop rainwater harvesting tanks with a total capacity for 6000,000 litres were built and installed. As a result of the success of the initial success of these rooftop water harvesting systems which have benefited up to 2,100 children in Sierra Leone, Senegal and Ethiopia, the Barefoot College is working on expanding its programmes to include more training in solar electrification for African women from Mali, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and the Gambia as a means of providing electricity and income to villages in these countries.

> The Barefoot College has trained 97 rural women across the globe as BSEs, including 11 women from Mali, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon in 2007. These women have shown that language, climate, culture, and schooling are no barriers to the practical mastery of solar systems. As the college ramps up its solar electrification projects across Africa, these women are leading by example: showing how the skills of the rural poor, de-linked from literacy, can drive their own development. The Barefoot approach remains distinct, but is gradually becoming a part of the official "system." The college is now moving into using non-traditional communications channels, including the Internet. To get out the message about its success it is producing videos and photography, and participating in international

> networks and meetings. Its initiative included training both men and women as barefoot doctors, hand pump mechanics (Roy & Hartigan, 2008, p. 90).

In the introduction to a paper written and presented by Lauren Remedios and Shweta Rao in 2013, regarding the ongoing revolutionary and pioneering work being carried out by the Barefoot College organization, they highlight the fact that many of the solar engineers being trained are mostly mothers and grandmothers with little or no schooling. In a question of six months they are equipped through hands on training with the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to make lamps and assemble electronic solar circuits, thus bringing into their

> home light by solar electrifying every household in their community. Being able to provide electricity to their community does not only give recognition and respect to a Barefoot Solar Engineer but also empowers her and gives her a source of income to support family and educate her children (Remedios & Rao, 2013, p. 3).

According to Remedios and Rao, reviewing results in 2013, the Barefoot College has provided sustainable solutions aimed mainly at women and children which have resulted in:

Water Solutions

- 1521 schools and communities having access to drinking water.
- Availability of 99.000.000 litres of drinking water through rainwater harvesting.
- 400 employed rural water engineers.
- 909 villages have access to rainwater harvesting technology.

Energy Solutions

- 1081 solar electrified villages.
- 859 trained barefoot women solar engineers.
- 64 countries world-wide with barefoot solar engineers.

Education Solutions

- 75000 children attending night schools since 1975.
- 14,000 teachers working in government schools.
- 700 villages with night schools.
- 4,500 Barefoot teachers.

Livelihood Solutions

- 5000 Barefoot artists

- 1 million dollars in sales in the last 12 years. (Remedios & Rao, 2013, p. 6)

The countries in Africa and Asia that have been impacted by the Barefoot College revolution include:

India, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Jordan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, South Sudan, Rwanda, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Zanzibar, Mozambique, Namibia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, Benin, Togo, Mali, Mauritania, Liberia, Burundi, Djibouti, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and South Africa, Solomon Island, Vanuatu, Nauru, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, Haiti, Peru, Bolivia, Haiti, Chile, (Remedios & Rao, 2013, p. 7).

The Barefoot organisation receives funding from various national and international agencies that include government and non-government bodies. Some of these sources are:

- *Ministry of External Affairs:* Funding provided for international solar training.
- *Ministry of New and Renewable Energy:* Funding provided for Indian solar training.

- *Central Social Welfare Board:* Funding provided for crèche.
- *Skoll Foundation; UN Women, UNDP: One United National; ENEL: Green Power; Barr Foundation; Erol Foundation; Bank of America:* Funding for solar equipment and training and rain water harvesting.
- *Charity Aid Foundation:* Funding for night schools
- *The Dalai Lama Trust:* General donations.
- Various awards (Remedios & Rao, 2013, p. 8).

Remedios and Rao assert that every year over 60 semi-literate or unschooled mothers / grandmothers in India and approximately 80 others from other developing countries travel to Tilonia in Rajasthan, where they spend 6 months immersed in the solar engineer training programme that is not only empowering but provides them with the tools to benefit their villages and children, offering them a future that was unheard of previously.

> Currently, there are 859 trained women solar engineers, and 38,600 solar electrified houses in 1,081 villages in 64 different countries. In addition to solar electrification, the women engineers also provide energy solutions to hot water, solar cookers, and fresh drinking water through solar powered desalination. The impact of this solar training and electrification is manifold contributing to poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and environmental protection (Remedios & Rao, 2013, p. 9).

Sylvie Castonguay states that the Barefoot College has successfully educated many hundreds of women, illiterate and semiliterate mothers and grandmothers, from both little developed and developing countries; training them into adept and efficient solar engineers. These are women who have returned to their villages to radically revolutionise their living conditions, through the installation, maintenance, repair and replacement of solar panels and batteries; while also training other members of their society in the same skills.

> As of December 2007, Indian Barefoot solar engineers had installed – with absolutely no aid from urban professionals – 8,700 solar units, generating 500 kilowatts (kW) per day, and manufactured 4,100 solar lanterns. As a result, 574 villages and hamlets (nearly 100,000 people) as well as 870 schools now have solar electricity (several villages have more than one school; average attendance is 25 to 30 children).
>
> In the remote Himalayas, 270 Barefoot solar engineers (57 of them semi-literate rural women) have installed 16 solar power plants of 2.5 kW each. The women also built 40 parabolic solar cookers and 71 solar water heaters as well as trained others in their communities so they could assist in the establishing of 23 rural electronic workshops (Castonguay, 2009, p. para. 7).

Most of the villages in question are in extremely remote locations; far away from the towns and cities, accessible only after days of travel in four-wheel drive

vehicles capable of managing the rugged terrain, followed by long distances that can only be covered on foot.

> Photovoltaic (PV) systems offer the only source of electricity to populations in these remote areas. Access to electricity through simple effective solutions such as the Barefoot approach can dramatically improve the lives of villagers and contributes to development. It lowers lighting costs, enables income-generation and supports educational activities as well as reducing the fire hazards and indoor pollution generated by traditional kerosene lighting (Castonguay, 2009, p. para. 3).

Originally, the training programs took in both men and women trainees. However, sometime in the 1990s, the college began to focus most of their attention on training middle aged women who were mostly grandmothers. The Annual National Symposia on Appropriate Technology at Howard University held in spring 2010, hosted Sanjit Bunker Roy as the featured speakers, (Appropriate Technology, 2010). During the conference, Roy asserted that

> Illiterate grandmothers are humble and easy to teach. Grandmothers have a vested interest in the village and have no desire to leave. Give a youth a piece of paper and he is off to the city to find a better job. […] By giving the rural poor access to practical technology, Barefoot College demystifies technology and puts it in the hands of the villagers themselves (as cited in Castonguay, 2009, para. 5).

As is well known, in many parts of rural India the use of the veil known as *purdah* is widespread. With the purdah women keep their heads and faces covered, in a way that is both physically and metaphorically restricting as well as self-annihilating. The intervention of the Barefoot College programs in rural areas, with a specific emphasis on training women has led to the necessary elimination of the use of the purdah by these women, as they carry out the tasks they have been trained by the college to do. Apart from monetary gains, the personal empowerment from the skills acquired by these women cannot be overstated. The training they receive enables these mothers and grandmothers to contribute to tangible improvements in the quality of life of not only their own families, but the entire villages. This undoubtedly changes the status of these women; from invisible housewives hidden behind the *purdah* and restricted to the domestic domain, into important members of their societies, with powerful voices and opinions that are taken into account. (Bhowmick, 2011)

> My husband will never say it, but I know he's proud of me. Now he asks me to maintain his accounts for him." Another said, "I now look back at my childhood when I always dreamed of doing something big for my society. My mother used to laugh at me. Today my family, my neighbours, and even the village elders respect me and value my contribution. It feels wonderful (as cited in Castonguay, 2009, para. 14).

The villages chosen to participate in the solar projects are responsible for committing to the project in a transparent and collective way, in order to acquire a sense of responsibility, involvement and ownership towards the project; as they control, manage and make decisions from the start. The services are not offered free of charge, the community decide what they can contribute per month monetarily, for the maintenance and repair of the installations. The amount usually coincides with the amount that they are accustomed to spending on kerosene sourced lighting and fuel.

The community is also responsible for choosing the two women who should be sent to Tilonia for the six month training programs for which they are offered guidelines such as the expected age of the trainees, their attitudes, etc. The fact that the trainees chosen must only be women is initially always met with "stunned surprise" (Castonguay, 2009, p. para.11). The Barefoot College was given the one million US dollars (US$ 1 million) Alcan Prize for Sustainability award in 2006, (Castonguay, 2009, p. para.11); (Alcan Prize for Sustainability , 2006).

Where do rural artists come into the Barefoot College picture? In 2003 the Barefoot College formed a partnership with US based friends of Tilonia, Inc. to operate the online site, www.tilonia.com in order to sell and market textiles, jewellery, accessories and gifts produced by the local rural women artisans. "Operated and maintained by Barefoot business managers in India, this e-commerce platform has opened up new income opportunities for the more than 400 artisans it supports" (Fish, 2016, p. 1). Executive director and founder of the

organisation *Friends of Tilonia*, Ellen Fish affirms that through the *Barefoot* initiative, over 400 villagers who are mostly illiterate or semi-literate women are presented opportunities that would otherwise be absolutely inaccessible to them. They use centuries old traditional Indian craft techniques which involve sewing, needlework, block printing, weaving, etc. to create for themselves alternative and supplementary income sources.

The women have normally had to face immense pressure and opposition from their families and village members, in attempting to break away from the traditional practices of wearing the purdah and getting married before reaching maturity, i.e. child marriages. The experience of attending the Barefoot College campus also teaches women the value of sending both daughters and sons to school. Fish recounts how Kailesh Kanwar, one of the women who staffs the Barefoot College campus, feels proud and highly empowered as she travels to some of the major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, as representative of the Tilonia Bazaars products. "The courage of these women in the face of initial opposition from their families has created economic opportunities for them and the women in their villages who work together, regardless of caste" (Fish, 2016, p. 3).

Rama Krishna Reddy Kummitha states that up to 1850 women have been trained by the Barefoot College and promoted with support from the Friends of Tilonia network. The art work created by these women is marketed through the Friends of Tilonia platform to a global market; and a part of the profit is also

destined towards the maintenance and running of the college. (Kummitha, 2016). The artists use techniques such as block printing, tie dye, leather work, weaving and embroidery all traditional rural techniques that have been employed for generations.

The artists often work from their homes and come from villages all around the area. The women are provided with the raw materials they need to create their work; once completed they hand these in to the centres set up in the villages specifically for this purpose. They are paid by check and taught how to sign their names and how to open and manage a bank account. In this way they are able to control and manage the income they earn as such acquiring independence and empowerment. "Barefoot College has helped artisans to develop cooperatives, develop product designs for contemporary urban markets, and market and sell the handcrafted products both domestically and internationally" (Fish, as cited in Ritchie, 2015, para. 5).

The techniques and materials used by these artists for their creations in the diverse areas of painting, embroidery and leather artefacts are manual processes using naturally available raw materials acquired from local productions. As such, not only is this endeavour socially empowering, but also environmentally friendly and highly sustainable. Natural fibres and dyes are used alongside hand-carved wooden blocks for printing, locally harvested cotton and silk from cocoons bred by local farmers. The cotton and silk are woven, spun and dyed using traditional hand weaving and natural dyeing techniques and everything is stitched together

using feet pedalled or hand powered sewing machines, (Fish, as cited in Ritchie, 2015).

As quoted earlier, in an interview between Fish and Ritchie, Fish stated that Tilonia art work was sold and marketed using diverse means both locally and internationally. The domestic market is supplied through production lines aimed at both Indian retailers and international buyers via Tilonia Bazaars and sales from exhibitions held in major cities. The same products are marketed using the website to retail and wholesale international buyers. In some cases, the prints and colours of home textiles are tailored to specific markets and vary accordingly.

Fish asserts that it is imperative that rural communities and the women involved in projects such *Artisans of Tilonia* are able to fit into the global industrial model, despite the fact that handmade art and crafts can take several weeks to finish. As she states, "after agriculture, artisan production is the second-largest employer in the developing world. Two-thirds of artisan crafts are produced in developing economies. And given that most people live in rural areas, it is vital to create rural livelihoods" (Fish, as cited in Ritchie, 2015, para. 13). It is clear that developing communities need to focus on local production in both arts and agriculture in order to continue to grow and even more specifically, so as to slow the influx of migrants from the rural parts of the country who are currently drowning the cities in these countries. Cities in developing countries are saturated by migration and are unable to offer anywhere near adequate facilities such as water, electricity, housing, sanitation or employment to those leaving their

villages in masses and arriving in search of opportunity. The drastic and often tragic consequences of such migrations have already been recounted earlier in this chapter.

As such, amongst the many challenges facing rural enterprises, one of the major ones is to find ways in which to build skills and capacity amongst the population, build sales by accessing diverse markets and find financing in order to promote and support enterprise growth. In Southern India, *Friends of Tilonia* work in partnership with *Rope International*, using waste products from agricultural production, mainly banana fibre, to produce home décor products which are marketed to international customers like *IKEA*, *Canvas Home Store* (wholesale customer) and *Sobremesa* (fair-trade wholesale customer); (Fish, as cited in Ritchie, 2015).[114]

[114] See: https://www.tilonia.com/

https://www.barefootcollege.org/

4.3.3 BHARAT BHAVAN: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN ART AND THE OTHER

Bharat Bhavan – literally meaning home of India – is the truly ambitious and innovative project in the form of a spectacular, 36,576 sq. metre multi-arts museum complex and cultural centre, designed by the luminary Indian architect, Charles Correa (1915-1930). It was inaugurated on February 13th 1982, by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in a fittingly grand and pompous ceremony and in the presence of the most important luminaries, cultural figures, artists, scholars and politicians of the time, (Sethi S. , 2013). Sunil Sethi states that

> The list of participants sounded like a cultural Who's Who of India, and as the celebrated company of Indian artists, dancers, musicians and writers, some 200 in number, descended upon Bhopal last fortnight, architect Charles Correa jokingly remarked: `If a bomb fell in this city just now, the future of Indian art would be assured´" (Sethi S. , 2013, p. para. 1).

The initial planning of the complex of Bharat Bhavan began during the mid-seventies, sponsored and pursued by the government of Madhya Pradesh, governed then by the Indian National Congress, (Aliste, 2017). Bharat Bhavan as a project was a uniquely progressive endeavour on the part of the Madhya Pradesh government; to sponsor and promote art and culture in the state. The then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, proposed marking the twenty fifth anniversary of India's

independence by setting up a national cultural centre in each state of India. Bharat Bhavan was also an attempt to decentralize cultural institutions from existing exclusively in the major cities of Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. The building of the complex was not straight forward and work continued up until 1981. Following a stretch of inactivity and questions regarding the viability of such a project as envisioned for Bharat Bhavan; the culmination of the complex was largely due to the tireless efforts of Arjun Singh and Ashok Vajpeyi, (Aliste, 2017).

As chief Minister of the Madhya Pradesh government, appointed in 1980, Arjun Singh embraced the Bharat Bhavan project with energy, passion and enthusiasm, appointing the acclaimed poet and writer Ashok Vajpeyi as Trustee-Culture Secretary of the project, (Hacker, 2014). Together they dreamed of a plan that would "project Madhya Pradesh as the cultural capital of India" (Sethi S. , 2013, p. para. 6). Sergio Román Aliste states that as the Trustee-Culture Secretary of Bharat Bhavan, Ashok Vajpeyi had the liberty to shape the Bharat Bhavan project as he saw appropriate. As an intellectual, he applied to the project artistically innovative and avant-garde theories of exhibition practices, alongside art and artist promotion. He had the insight to count on the support of the most eminent artists and intellectuals of the time; also committed to the liberal philosophy and vanguard ideals behind the Bharat Bhavan vision, (Aliste, 2017).

Bharat Bhavan, the multi-arts museum complex includes an indoor theatre, an outdoor amphitheatre overlooking the lake, workshop and performance spaces,

split-level exhibition and gallery spaces and a library. The gallery and exhibition spaces are lit by natural light from three skylight structures. The famous Roopankar Museum is made up of two wings dedicated to contemporary urban art and to folk and *Adivasi* art. Ashok Vajpeyi explained his vision in these words, "We are trying to say two things to the artists, 'you matter' and to the public 'arts matter'" (as cited in Sethi S., 2013, para. 7).

Over thirty five years later, despite cultural and political upheavals, Bharat Bhavan continues to house and host a rich and varied offer of cultural and artistic events. Charles Correa who died in June 2015, was not only an activist and self-confessed follower of Gandhian values of civil action and community service himself; but also a firm believer in developing an "an authentic Indian modernity that superseded the condescending orientalism and stale imports of colonialism" (Rykwert, 2015, p. para.2). Bart Bryant-Mole of Arch Daily states that in designing Bharat Bhavan and other architectural accomplishments in India, Correa aimed to establish an architectural style that was specific to modern India and its architectural heritage, different from European Modernism. In accomplishing this in Bharat Bhavan, quite fittingly, Correa created a building complex that is not only modern but also manages to "remain firmly rooted in the vernacular traditions of India's past" (Bryant-Mole, 2016, p. para. 2).

Bharat Bhavan is situated in the beautiful Shamla hills of Bhopal and is made up of a series of low level blocks that include terraced gardens and courtyards descending gently down a slope leading to a magnificent view of the

city of Bhopal across the Upper Lake. The courtyards and terraces provide access to the different galleries and facilities creating the effect, as Correa himself put it, of a "disaggregation […] and the movement through open to sky spaces that lie between" (Correa, 2010, p. 49). Katherine Hacker elaborates further on the inspiration behind the design of Bharat Bhavan stating that "Correa's innovative, site-specific design responded to the mandate of the Bharat Bhavan to provide ''interactive proximity'' to the verbal, visual, and performing arts" (Hacker, 2014, p. 192).

The initial envisioning of the utility of a complex such as Bharat Bhavan, has been attributed to the extraordinarily progressive vision and energy of its founding director, the intellectual-painter and poet Jagdish Swaminathan (1928-1994); (Hacker, 2014); (Turner & Kapur, 2001). Swaminathan was based in Delhi and was doubtlessly amongst the most dynamic and energetic visionaries of the art scene at the time. He was known to have been "an artist, writer, ideologue, institution maker and activist […] straddled worlds of art and politics in his tempestuous life. […] his influence on the Indian modern art scene is considered seminal" (S.Kalidas, 2011, p. 80).

In 1980, Ashok Vajpeyi urged Swaminathan to settle in Bhopal and take charge of creating a permanent collection of work for Bharat Bhavan; one that would be on par with collections seen in the cities. Swaminathan energetically sought to move away from the established norms and trends of post-independent exhibition practices; which were evident in institutions such as the *National*

Gallery of Modern Art and the *Lalit Kala Academy* in Delhi, of which he was scathingly critical. He envisioned artist centred and managed centres innovatively displaying work within frameworks that would be free of the weight of historic and ethnographic discourse, (Aliste, 2017).

Vajpeyi states that Swaminathan moved to Bhopal on the condition that the Bharat Bhavan complex would allow for an active space for artists and their artistic creations. Swaminathan sought a dynamic and creative space, in which between twenty to thirty artists could work and interact with each other; in doing so, the work they created would also be rooted in the display and exhibition project that was Bharat Bhavan, (as cited in Aliste, 2017). At the same time, Vajpeyi set in motion the completion of Bharat Bhavan which had been at a standstill until then. He thus successfully integrated Swaminathan's vision of a dynamic and versatile space, making a reality of what had until then been merely an ambitious and undoubtedly progressive mirage. According to Vajpeyi, his relationship with Swaminathan and the wholehearted support offered by the Chief Minister, Arjun Singh, allowed for the innovative redefinition of the concept of artistic creation and display into a wholly new dynamic and interactive space, as envisioned by J. Swaminathan, (as cited in Aliste, 2017).

Hacker asserts that the Bharat Bhavan complex as an institution of contemporary art represents a truly distinguished experiment in creatively rewriting the discourse and norms of display of art by modern urban artists alongside indigenous *Adivasi* artists. Jagdish Swaminathan rejected the idea of

the western model of museum display that prioritizes periodization; instead emphasizing that art objects could "exist in a shared same space and time" (Hacker, 2014, p. 191); for which he coined the phrase *Contemporaneity.*

In her essay titled, *A Stake in Modernity: A Brief History of Modern Indian Art* (Turner & Kapur, 2001, p. 146); Geeta Kapur declares that the times and position of the Indian art scene in the period marked between the 1960s and 80s led artists like J. Swaminathan to sought "to reach mystically in a sense some absolute ahistorical state of being" (Turner & Kapur, 2001, p. 155). This, specifically on the part of Swaminathan, involved delving into and attempting to identify the consciousness of the *Adivasi* notion of cyclical time and metaphorical thought. As such, in

> 1982, Swaminathan, the main exponent of this position, set up in Bhopal – one of India's provincial capitals situated in the heart of tribal terrain – a museum of modern Indian art vis-à-vis a tribal art museum. He declared both to be equally contemporary, (Turner & Kapur, 2001, p. 156).

Raphael Rousseleau, professor at the *University of Lausanne* in Paris reminds us that the Indian constitution officially recognises a part of the rural population as the *listed tribes* or with the preferred term of identification, *Adivasi*; (Rousseleau, 2017). Rousseleau also highlights the fact that folk and tribal or Adivasi art have unclear boundaries and or differences and as such, the relatively new generic term *Vernacular art*, to encompass both forms emerged.

The Adivasi people make up approximately 8% of the population of India, (Varma, 2013). As Rashmi Varma asserts, most of the Adivasi population are located on the peripheries of the country's national and cultural boundaries while others are scattered inland. To date, they are still amongst the poorest and most socially neglected population of India. Currently, half the Adivasi population, which would amount to approximately 40 million people, live in abject poverty. They do not have access to even the most basic amenities which would include education, healthcare or employment. Their condition has been further worsened by the fact that they traditionally live in areas of luscious forestation, close to flowing rivers and in locations that have been found to be rich in valuable minerals. As such, they have been subjected to massive and disproportionate displacements by the post-colonial Indian project policies which focus on these key sites, where the Adivasi traditionally reside, for economic exploitation and wealth accumulation.

Euphemised as development, in the form of dam constructions and mining, the Adivasi population have been routinely displaced to make way for constructions and projects which serve the interests of the wealthy urban middle classes, the World Bank and large international corporations, (Varma, 2013).[115] This obliges us to briefly highlight the other take of the promotion of vernacular

[115] See also: The Cost of Living by Arundhati Roy; (Roy A. , 2010).

art, from a different angle; focusing not on how this might be or is benefiting the members of this population whose work is recognised and valued, but on those who make up the other side of the coin.

Varma states that in post-colonial nations such as India, the accumulation – in many cases by force – of the lands, culture, labour and art of indigenous populations such as the Adivasi people of India, is an integral part of the politics of economy and development. As such, there are often far from innocent meanings behind some of the accumulation and circulation of vernacular art; within the context of forces both political and economic, which currently shape the world. There is a "doubled sense in which indigenous art, like indigenous knowledge, lands and resources, is wrenched from its producers and forced into the capitalist process" (Varma, 2013, p. 751). Varma cites David Harvey's argument that in the current ongoing state of global capitalism, "primitive accumulation" (as cited in Varma, 2013, pg. 751), has become a necessary part of global capitalism. New boundaries are established; walls are constructed in order to take possession of diverse commons including land, water, knowledge, culture and art. This forms part of a deliberate process, in an ongoing attempt to thwart crisis and maintain profit, in the midst of an ever increasing and complex series of economic downturns which continuously threaten capitalism. Harvey argues that capitalist hegemony enforces the creation of the other, who can then be forcefully absorbed for the benefit and maintenance of this hegemony. This argument can be

seen as particularly relevant to the situation of the Adivasi people, their art and cultures, as it is also to other folk and vernacular artists and societies of India.

> […] as it struggles to find a place within established art institutions such as the museum and the global art market while also standing out of place within them as other, either excluded and annulled, or colonised and commodified. Its accumulation as a certain kind of posture towards a distant past enables national and transnational profiteering in the cultural realm, even as its accumulation as "primitive" or exotic art (that is also a commodity) in the contemporary world opens up new spheres of trafficking in art in general (Varma, 2013, p. 751).

Geeta Kapur states that until recent years, there was […] an aspiration for the artist to become a central national figure. It was hoped that the artist would articulate in work and speech a historical position that would clearly demarcate a hospitable national space. This ideal of an integrated identity had something to do with the mythic imaginary of lost communities. It had to do with nationalism, Third World utopias and postcolonial culturalism (Turner & Kapur, 2001, p. 47). Within this political, anti-imperialist vision, J. Swaminathan was a communist-anarchist. Kapur declares that most of the artists of the time, including household names like M.F. Husain and Satish Gujral, were "privileged members of the *Nehruvian* liberal ethos. Until recently, the identity of the Indian artist was largely modern and secular", (Turner & Kapur, 2001, p. 47).

As Kapur asserts, it is clear that by foregrounding his vision, Swaminathan successfully drew attention to the cruel and unfair subordination of indigenous Adivasi and folk artists and their work, thus successfully altering the cultural and artistic discourse of Indian art, not only of the period but from then onwards, (Turner & Kapur, 2001). Hacker states that Swaminathan radically rearranged prevailing notions of the period regarding the display of Adivasi art, which until then had been predominantly shaped by ethnographic interest, (Hacker, 2014). The now famous Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts was created and set up in Bharat Bhavan presumably for this purpose.

Swaminathan directed the enlistment and assigning of groups of students from government art schools and institutes in different cities of Madhya Pradesh in order to carry out the initial ground work required to find the art and artists for the *Roopankar museum*. They were meticulously educated in the art and culture of Adivasi art. Led by one senior artist in charge, the students were divided into groups of six members who proceeded to comb the state of Madhya Pradesh including what is today *Chattisgarh*, for samples of vernacular and Adivasi art creations. Both Swaminathan and the students travelled extensively, collecting samples and documenting what they encountered. As one of the team members, Archana Verma related to Katherine Hacker; the students were not supposed to collect samples of utensils, clothes or jewels, but the quality of many of the designs they encountered proved irresistible; and some of the students were unable

to stop themselves from including these amongst the samples they took back, two months later, (Hacker, 2014); (Aliste, 2017).

Hacker points out that although the way in which the art samples were gathered might appear more akin to an ethnographic approach than otherwise, the way in which the main body of artwork that was gathered, documented and framed as both contemporary and art; was "a deliberate and radically different exhibition strategy" (Hacker, 2014, p. 191). Undoubtedly, J. Swaminathan's intervention moved the focus from the purely anthropological and anonymous approach of what is viewed under the umbrella of anonymous, artisanal and tribal towards the recognition of individual artists and their endeavours. From then onwards, as Hacker determines, there was a consensus move on the part of the government, through the development of numerous projects sponsored and directed by the state towards validating the contemporaneity of the crafts and the individuality of the artists involved.

Katherine Hacker asserts that Swaminathan's intervention led to "a decisive shift from the long-standing institutional practice of categorizing and classifying this large corpus as craft" (Hacker, 2014, p. 191); though state sanctioned projects including many of the institutions mentioned in previous chapters such as the *All India Handicrafts Board* established in 1962, the well-known *National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum*, known as the *Crafts museum*, set up in 1956 in New Delhi, as well as the annual *National Craftsman Award* established in 1965. However, it is also pertinent to recall that although undoubtedly,

Swaminathan was key to initiating the acknowledgment of individual identity and contemporaneity of indigenous Adivasi and folk artists, it was also the tireless efforts of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, – whose work and contribution we have looked at earlier in this study – that laid the fundamental groundwork for the renaissance of the validation of folk art and artists.

During her lifetime, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay placed special emphasis on the need to create visibility and recognition for women, to raise awareness of the cultural and artistic validity of their artistic efforts and the necessity for formal validation of the same. The institutions mentioned above, which were the fruit of the efforts and intervention of Chattopadhyay as well as many forgotten names, whose efforts were indispensable in the movement towards reviving a focus on the crafts and crafts people of India, albeit not from the perspective of contemporary art.

Perhaps the very first documented text to collect examples of the art of rural communities in India was published in 1951, by Verrier Elwin; it was titled *The Tribal Art of Middle India,* (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.3). Verrier Elwin was a British missionary, self-trained anthropologist and ethnologist. He later abandoned the church and became an Indian citizen and an important figure in the Indian public scene from the 1930s until his death in 1964, (Guha, 1999). Elwin was also a close friend of William. G. Archer; mentioned in relation to his discovery and promotion of the Mithila art and artists of Madhubani, earlier in this study. Elwin took a profound and personal interest “in the revalorization and

defense of these marginalized groups, whose artistic forms represented a particularly tangible cultural expression" (as cited in Rousseleau, 2017, para. 3). He was a close friend of both Nehru and Gandhi, and pushed for the protection of this segment of society, traditionally vulnerable, often discriminated and marginalised. After independence, positive discrimination policies were established to combat some of the issues that these so called *classified castes* or *Dalit:* "oppressed" (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.5), populations faced.

Elwin was amongst the first to campaign for the establishment of research institutes and training programmes aimed at the development and recognition of the cultural and aesthetic value of an art form that was largely hidden and highly undervalued. In 1949, Nehru set up the first showcase of Indian handicrafts in the form of the *Central Cottage Industries Emporium*, (as cited in Rousseleau, 2017, para. 6); a large space, structured in a fair exhibition format that continues to be the model for showcasing Indian rural or folk art and handicrafts in many venues today. The *All India Handicrafts Board* (as cited in Rousseleau, 2017, para. 6), was set up three year later in 1952. This laid the first steps for the establishment of the already cited *National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum* in New Delhi; which later came to be known as the *Crafts Museum*, opening its doors in 1956. Rousseleau asserts that *The Crafts museum* in New Delhi was

> Designed as a conservatory of arts and crafts, at the same time as a center of national patronage of artisans, it evolves into a showcase of cultural policy. This is particularly the case in the 1970s and 1980s, which are

> experiencing a new wave of spiritual travels from Westerners to India and then the proliferation of Indian festivals in Europe and the United States. Echoing this kind of quest, the director of the then Craft Museum, Pupul Jayakar, presents folk and tribal art as the survival of millennial rites at the "Mother Earth" of India (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.6).

Rousseleau also acknowledges however that Elwin was an exception and up until the 1980s, the artistic expressions of the Adivasi and other indigenous rural populations of India were little appreciated or recognised for their own merit. They simply formed part of a large collection of unclassified objects in the form of popular craftsmanship, (Rousseleau, 2017). Jyotindra Jain states of Elwin as being the "first one who didn't deal with the tribal culture as material culture but creative expression." (Tripathi, 2010, p. para.1). For the first time in 1988, a festival of India opened in Japan showcasing an exhibition exclusively of *Adivasi* art. It was titled *"The Art of the Adivasi (Indian Tribal Art)"* (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.7).

This exhibition became the marking point of a new take on the perception of Adivasi and other forms of vernacular art of the indigenous and rural populations of India. Pupul Jayakar chaired the exhibition which was curated by Jagdish Swaminathan, who was by then actively established in Bharat Bhavan. Jyotindra Jain had taken over from Pupul Jayakar at the Crafts Museum in New Delhi, while Haku Shah was in charge of the Crafts Museum in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. As Rousseleau affirms, "this exhibition is emblematic for more than one

reason; it sees the formulation of perspectives still unpublished and is carried by new actors: art historians trained in ethnology and artists keen on this discipline" (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.7).

Thus, it would be valid to assert that the combined efforts of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jayakar, J. Swaminathan and Jyotindra Jain, as well as Verrier Elwin and William G. Archer, account not only for the initial changes in perception towards non-urban, folk or vernacular and Adivasi art and artists of the region, but also the beginning of empowerment for artists like Ganga Devi, Sita Devi, Sonabai and others. Annapurna Garimella states that

> in the field of art, how Indian modernity and contemporaneity are conceived rests on the question of presentation in the making of identity […] J. Swaminathan was able to actualize a political vision for Indian modernism which refused to ghettoize tribal artists into another temporality (Garimella, 2011, p. 65).

In other words, what this suggests is that the political implications of art exhibitions and museums that include vernacular, folk or Adivasi art alongside contemporary urban art are shaped in as much by the representation and presentation of the pieces as by the actual practice of creating the art. Swaminathan defined "contemporaneity as a simultaneous validity of co-existing cultures" (as cited in Garimella, 2011, p. 65). He insisted on the modernity of vernacular artists who as he stated were "engaged in creative acts of making, like

any modernist, […] Adivasi artists shared the same temporality even if they lived in different locations" (Garimella, 2011, p. 65). It is clear that Swaminathan's understanding of Adivasi or vernacular art within the context of Indian modernity was far removed from the established interpretation, not only at the time, but even that of today, as evidence would suggest. As Garimella states,

> Swaminathan placed Adivasi art in the same complex as modern art at Roopankar and sought to create a sense of identity between the urban and the rural, the cosmopolitan and the indigenous and thus develop a new vision of Indian modernity (Garimella, 2011, p. 65).

Without a doubt, Swaminathan sought to use such innovative curatorial and exhibition practices in order to move away from the hitherto format of study of Adivasi and folk art; from a socio economic and anthropological approach, to what he expressed as "an attempt to open our eyes to their art" (as cited in Hacker, 2014, p. 194). Hacker highlights the fact that in the *Roopankar gallery of folk art* at *Bharat Bhavan*, the artworks are deliberately void of anything other than the bare minimum of information regarding their origins, just as in the gallery of urban art.

> This deferral of other meanings is, of course, quite intentional in that Swaminathan was actively working to place the rural and the urban on the same platform. In visual shorthand, […] yet there are no label texts with ''ethnographic'' descriptions here in the gallery (Hacker, 2014, p. 194).

Hacker also compares Swaminathan's approach to that of the art historian Stella Kramrisch, whose exhibition titled, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village,* held in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1968, aimed to "reposition Adivasi and folk material from the domain of *craft* to that of *art* (Hacker, 2014, p. 194). Unlike Swaminathan however, Kramrisch did not focus on the individuality of the artists concerned. The twin wings of Bharat Bhavan located side by side and set up by Swaminathan to make up the Roopankar museum were deliberately designed to create an "interactive proximity" which would "establish equality between elite and subaltern groups on the basis of aesthetics and innovation" (Hacker, 2014, p. 196). Through the advocacy of the proper individuality of these folk and Adivasi artists alongside their art, Swaminathan also challenged the prevailing post-independence debates regarding the endangered status of these artistic traditions, or their need for protection, preservation and rescuing; swinging the construct towards acknowledgement of individuality in talent alongside individual creative energies and impulses.

In the 1987 Bharat Bhavan catalogue titled *The Perceiving Fingers,* Swaminathan draws attention to the dividing characteristics of the deeply embedded cast system in Hinduism, pointing out the dire necessity of eliminating the divisions of cast in order to achieve harmony and rapport in the diverse artistic traditions within folk, Adivasi and urban art contemporary art. Katherine Hacker

emphasizes the importance of Swaminathan's work and vision in establishing the exhibition strategies that initially shaped Bharat Bhavan, by stating that

> Swaminathan's views of folk and Adivasi arts and their relationships to other artistic traditions, as well as the location of Adivasi peoples alongside Hinduism and caste structure were especially important because they provided a rationale for the collecting and display policies of the museum. (Hacker, 2014, p. 202).

In 1990, the right winged conservative party the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), mentioned earlier in this study came into power in Madhya Pradesh. The policies that had been established by J. Swaminathan were attacked and partially amended by the party, thus temporarily stripping the Museum of its autonomy and converting it into a government controlled institution. BJP aimed to control and stipulate which cultures, histories and artistic practices were to be displayed and promoted not only in Bharat Bhavan but in cultural institutions around the country in general. Swaminathan states that the BJP sought to convert Bharat Bhavan into a centre embodying Indian cultural and religious history from the Hindu perspective, as presented in the Ramayana, (as cited in Aliste, 2017).

As a result, Swaminathan resigned as director of the complex that same year, as did other trustees such as M.F. Hussain and the previous chief minister Arjun Singh. As recently as 2014, Ashok Vajpeyi, the former Bharat Bhavan Trustee-Culture Secretary and minister Madhya Pradesh who alongside

Swaminathan had been instrumental in the creation of the museum, also lamented the loss of the rich tradition of Bharat Bhavan. As a well-known poet and critic, Vajpeyi accused the government of "demolishing an institution" (Saxena, 2014). Luckily, Bharat Bhavan has somewhat recuperated from this assault although too late for Jagdish Swaminathan, who passed away in 1994.

Garimella points out that today the Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts has a specific space reserved for Adivasi artists in the Tribal and Folk Art Gallery, separate from the so called modernists, who are displayed in the Urban or Modern Art Gallery. This Garimella defines as reasonable, from the curatorial perspective. However, she also asserts there is a lack of homogeneity in the regional diversity to be found in the galleries. While the urban artists displayed are unlimited in origin, all the art and artists shown in the Folk and Tribal Gallery originate from Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. This gives the display a "regional, even sub-nationalist tone. […] In museology and exhibition design, especially in its website where the possibility of updating Swaminathan's vision is easier, familiar patterns of forced anonymity and anthropological preoccupation with region and ethnic differences continue" (Garimella, 2011, p. 65).

Garimella also states that there has been no visible public display of disagreement with this policy or any attempts to "realign Roopankar's curatorial politics" (Garimella, 2011, p. 65), by either urban or vernacular artists. In a country teeming with economic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, one can but speculate about the probabilities of why this might be the case. The

complex politics of current India controlled by the arguably oppressive regime of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which blatantly upholds Hindu nationalism – *Hindutva,* a term referring to the so called 'Hinduness' of India; – may not allow for frank criticism or opinions regarding possible nationalist tendencies in curatorial and cultural politics. Indeed, the present political and cultural climate would seem to leave little room or will for open questioning, or dissidence regarding this matter.

Despite the limitations outlined by Garimella and in spite of major political and economic upheavals as well a number of natural and man induced disasters, such as the Union Carbide leakage disaster in 1984, and the floods that regularly hit Bhopal, – resulting in inundations that damaged and destroyed a major part of the work in storage in 2005, (Shastri, 2005); – Bharat Bhavan continues to be an impressive accomplishment. It has gone to great lengths in striving to maintain the identity and philosophy with which it was birthed by its founders and artists who envisioned a common space where the arts and varied creative endeavours would harmoniously be integrated in shared time and contemporaneity.

Bharat Bhavan is now approaching its fortieth decade of existence, still expanding its coverage of the arts without losing sight of the vision of its founding members. It has recently opened up a wing dedicated to cinema including amongst its functions the diffusion of classical, independent and international film. According to Sergio Aliste, Annarpurna Garimella asserts that

> […] el ejemplo palpitante de la labor de Swaminathan sigue hoy activo en las instalaciones del Bhārat Bhavan, y su legado ideológico no ha perdido ni un ápice de actualidad en el contexto actual de India (Garimella, 2011), que ha prolongado sus debates en torno a las artes procedentes del ámbito rural como uno de los temas centrales de la contemporaneidad india (as cited in Aliste, 2017, p. 123).

In 1998, Jyotindra Jain, the aforecited eminent art historian and curator of India furthered the cause of vernacular and Adivasi art contemporaneity while also challenging the previously mentioned prevailing separatist curatorial politics, as also outlined by Rashni Varma.

> Although Bharat Bhavan advertises its art gallery Roopankar as 'the only museum of its kind in India which houses contemporary folk and tribal art together with urban art', a visit to the gallery reveals that there too the separation is maintained in the form of two distinctive sections - one for modern Indian art understood to be "urban" and one devoted to folk and tribal art thought to have roots in the village. (Varma, 2013, p. 4)

Jyotindra Jain organised an exhibition titled *"Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India",* in the *National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum*. The exhibition included the most prolific vernacular artists of the time, amongst them, women who have already been looked at earlier in this

study. They were the artists Jangarh Singh Shyam, Sonabai, Jivya Soma Mashe, Neelamani Devi and Ganga Devi. Jain stated that the exhibition was preoccupied with "the sensibility of those contemporary folk and tribal artists…who neither see themselves as belonging to an imaginary *traditional* society nor as waiting outside the precincts of the world of *modern* art to be absorbed and recognised on the latter's terms" (Jain J. , 1998, p. 14) Jyotindra Jain not only represented them as individual artists, ensuring recognition of their contemporaneity, identity and individuality as artists; but also succeeded in keeping intact the vernacular or communal identity and characteristics of their work. Sambrani states that there had until then been

> […] little space in such a historical model for folk, Adivasi and popular visual culture to be taken seriously as art. A major argument against this situation was developed through the exhibition […] presenting a powerful case for the ability of non-modernist work to participate in innovative contemporary practice on its own terms (Sambrani, 2005, p. 14).

Garimella classifies as "noteworthy" (Garimella, 2011, p. 65), the space that Jain reserved for the women artists of this show, which she determines as being a challenging achievement even today. Each artist in the catalogue is represented individually, with specific details of their personal biographies and community life; thus at least during that period, conferring on them the deserved identity and individuality of any modern, contemporary artist, (Jain J. , 1998). In

2010 a version of the original exhibition under the same title was held at the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris. Jyotindra Jain continues to be engaged in setting up policies that actively promote and conduce towards raising awareness and helping vernacular artists through artists in residency programmes and exhibition fairs, while continuing to emphasize the importance of "recognition of 'masters' reaching a 'Personal expression' within regional traditions" (Rousseleau, 2017, p. para.13).

From September 2004 until the end of 2006, the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth, *the Asia Society Museum* and *Queens Museum of Art* in New York, the *Tamayo Museum* in Mexico city, The *Museum of Contemporary Art* in Monterrey, Mexico; and the *National Galleries of Modern Art* in both Delhi and Mumbai hosted what could be considered as a ground breaking exhibition titled *Edge of desire. Recent Arts in India* (Sambrani, 2005). Thirty nine artists encompassing urban and cosmopolitan to traditional, vernacular and Adivasi artists are shown together, juxtaposed with what can only be considered as the deliberate intent to eliminate the diverse forms, suggestions and implications of hegemony.

Despite the biased tendencies that apparently continue to prevail in terms of curatorial practices which are what ultimately establish the worthiness of the different art productions originating from both urban and non-urban communities; clear advances in the reception and perception towards vernacular and Adivasi art can be noted. However, although the economic growth following the 1990s has

permitted many Indian artists, including especially women artists, to establish themselves in both the national and global markets, offering them the opportunity of becoming sought after investment options; the vast majority of these artists come from the privileged, financially secure backgrounds of the upper middle class societies of India. As members of the elite upper-class, they have had access to the appropriate institutions, agents and contacts which have ensured their visibility and gained them the celebrity status that many of them enjoy today.

It can be safely asserted that the last two decades have provided increasingly more options leading to empowerment and opportunities for vernacular and Adivasi artists. A number of them have managed to gain the merits of individual creativity, fame, market revaluation and recognition of their work. Nevertheless, there are many who still struggle to form part of the social and financial registers. They generally remain anonymous and invisible contributors to the rapidly growing artisan economy and industry; working to supply ever increasing market openings in the major metropoles. They make up the hands that paint, weave, stich and sculpt the unmistakable, *made in India* craft and artisan products, which are in more and more demand from both tourists and private export businesses, (Varma, 2013). Unfortunately, in many cases they remain anonymous and invisible pegs in the gigantic wheel that contributes to the booming Indian economy.

In some cases, global connectivity combined with selfless, ingenious entrepreneurs, alongside online networks are working towards slowly bridging

some of the gaps. These endeavours are helping to bring about recognition and create opportunities that contribute to empowerment for rural women artists; initially left in the side lines of remote villages. *Terra Klay*, an organisation founded by Manvee Vaid is a fine example. Originally from Mumbai, Manvee Vaid currently lives in a suburb of Chicago, in Illinois, USA. A local teashop in Indiana decided to sell their Indian tea along with Indian pottery. Manvee Vaid took advantage of the idea by travelling to the hilly regions of Manipur in the North eastern area of India and meeting with the local artists who were mostly women. She set up a company in order to market their unique black-clay teapots to the global market. "The challenge is to find a way to succeed in keeping a craft alive by adapting to changes in style, taste, and trends, […]. Making it more current to consumer taste, while still retaining the essence of the culture and the craft," (Vaid, as cited in Chhabra, 2017, para. 10).[116]

Similar examples of empowerment and authority, gained through commercial opportunities leading to visibility of their art – as outlined in earlier cases – have been obtained by rural women benefiting from trade initiatives, many of which have their original beginnings outside India. Vaid recounts that the extra income that the women earn has not only alleviated some of the burdens of their domestic obligations, but has also helped them gain the respect of the whole

[116] Please visit: https://www.terraklay.com/ for more details about this inspiring endeavour.

community, perhaps more especially their menfolk, as well as status and independence. The women have been able to invest their earnings to buy small plots of land near their homes where they are setting up their pottery studios. They have thus also succeeded in reviving a pottery tradition that was in real danger of dying out. "Exposure to global markets has made the women more savvy entrepreneurs, […]. They're gaining confidence in making production and sales decisions, and they're learning how to adapt designs to the tastes of U.S. consumers", (Vaid, as cited in Chhabra, 2017, para. 14). Other ventures of the above characteristics are *Mithila Asmita, Cloth Roads, Global Goods Partners, Unleashed World and Eternal Threads*, amongst others.[117]

[117] Links to these and other organisations can be found at http://www.artisanalliance.org/regional-map/

PART 5 WOMEN IN "HIGH" ART: AN APPRAISAL OF TWO CONTEMPORARY WOMEN ARTISTS; NALINI MALANI AND NAVJOT ALTAF

> Is art to bear witness to its time as some writers suggest? If so, what will artists witness…? Will the artist protest…? Will the artist suggest an alternative vison?
>
> Pitika Ntuli, from the catalogue of the Universal Declaration of Human rights: International Print Portfolio, (as cited in Kelly, 2000).

Some records indicate that before the mid-1980s *women artists* as a distinction barely existed in India (Achar, 2015). What is clear however is that practically all the female practising artists of the period had been actively involved in vigorous and colourful art producing activities; since as far back as the 1960s, in some cases, making and exhibiting a significant body of artwork. Artists such as Arpita Singh (1937), Madhavi Parekh (1942), Nalini Malani (1946) and Nilima Sheikh (1945), to mention a few, had begun their art practise several years earlier. However, within art-critical discourses of the time, where issues of modernism in the context of post-independence were being discussed and debated,

these female artists were positioned alongside their male counterparts as *new contemporaries* or *young artists*. (Achar, 2015). Although in many cases, these artists' art was recognised as women-centred or even feminist – for example in the case of Nalini Malani, – they were not considered as "belonging coherently to a cogent body of work that could be theorised under the rubric of the *Indian woman artist*" (Achar, 2015, p. 198).

New Contemporaries, an exhibition that was curated by the artist curator, Gulammohamed Sheik (1937) apparently highlighted a certain increasing interest amongst artists in issues that affected local people and environments above generalised themes as well as the increasing presence of women artists on the scene. However, Gayatri Sinha also states that

> Women's participation and engagement in art became suddenly conspicuous during the decade of the feminism, the 1970s. But even as women rode the crest of visibility in art, their work did not echo prevailing feminist polemic. In the intervening three decades, in an ironic inversion, even as feminism in India gasps and flounders for new directions, women's art seems to acquire a sinew of intention and expression. (Sinha G. , 2002, p. 59).

There were other additional factors that were critical to the constitution of the Indian woman artist. Amongst these, specifically, was the acceptance of the professionalism of the women artist; the acknowledgement and recognition of the

presence of women artists who were not mere hobby painters. This factor was crucial to the development and construction of the *modern woman artist*. Amrita Sher-Gil's insistent and inexorable portrayal of herself as a professional painter, above everything else, was crucial in positioning her as a leading iconic symbol within the concept of the Indian woman artist which was being constructed. Meanwhile, a series of interventions in the 1970s by Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Madhu Parekh and Nilima Sheikh also became decisive factors in the new definition of the Indian woman artist.

Between 1969 and 1972, the eminent Mumbai artist Akbar Padamsee (1928), organised a multi-disciplinary workshop for experimentation and collaboration called Vision Exchange (VIEW)[118]. The endeavour involved artists, filmmakers and a psychoanalyst and played a critical role not only in establishing a space for dialogue and exchange between Indian artists and the international avant-garde, but also in establishing alternative, interdisciplinary art practices. Nalini Malani, then in her twenties, and Nasreen Mohamedi were the only female participants in VIEW. A few years later, in the summer of 1979, Nalini Malani strolled down Wooster Street in New York to visit the then recently inaugurated, all female artist cooperative A.I.R. gallery in New York; which was also the first of its kind in the USA. She met Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), the Cuban American

[118] See: https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/the-unblinkered-vision1

multidisciplinary artist, activist artist Nancy Spero (1926-2009) and feminist activist artists May Stevens (1924). She returned to India inspired with the ambitious mission of organising an all-women touring exhibition in India.

> Taken by the gallery's fierce determination to create a space for the work of female artists, in a city whose galleries otherwise almost never showed female work, let alone women of colour, Malani returned to India with the aim of extending the formula (Tomas, 2017, p. para 7).

Working alongside the sculptor Piloo Pochkhanawala, first they unsuccessfully applied to diverse organisations requesting sponsorship for five years. Sadly, before they could start exhibiting Piloo Pochkhanawala passed away. The show comprising the work of Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh and Nilima Sheikh went ahead with scarce sponsorship; between 1987 and 1989. The show titled *Through the Looking Glass*, toured the following venues and cities; Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, Kala Yatra in Bangalore, Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay, Shridharani Gallery in New Delhi and the Centre for Contemporary Art in New Delhi. Watercolour was the media they used for their work in order to maintain homogeneity in display and to facilitate transportation. They travelled by train, second class, and held a total of five shows in mainly non-commercial venues.

Nilima Sheikh clarifies that as a new phenomenon, they received attention mainly from female critics; stating that "there was a perplexity about why four

women were showing together, and a rather patronizing or condescending response. But I think […] it did start an understanding of what women in art getting together could possibly mean," (as cited in Bhuyan, 2019, para. 30). Nilima Sheikh also asserted that their interest in holding the shows based on a set of artistic parameters that centred on their gender led to a certain limitation in terms of their acceptance of the offer of work and visibility by existing art institutional networks (as cited in Achar, 2015).

> They were interested in reframing their work in such a way that questions of a gendered art practice might be foregrounded. […] The issue was not about individual opportunities or recognition; rather, it was more a question of investigating the manner in which a group of *women artists* would reposition individual oeuvres in ways that could meaningfully open the field to them (Sheikh, as cited in Achar, 2015, p. 201).

Equally relevant is the fact that throughout the set of travelling shows, the artists exhibited a few new pieces; they were thus able to in the process build up a significant body of work. Deeptha Achar asserts that the artists' use of watercolour as their medium, working on paper rather than canvas, apart from offering the required ease of mobility was significant in the symbolic value of *high art* that accompanies oil and canvas versus the use of the small format of water colour. This served as a clear metaphor for the marginalised site of gender. The artists also chose to exhibit in venues that were not the major national art

exhibition centres of Delhi and Mumbai, opting rather for smaller galleries in the large major art centres and lesser known spaces, for example in Bangalore and Bhopal. As such, "the logic of the marginal and the minor in gender relations […] was brought into play", (Achar, 2015, p. 202). Achar further asserts that although these shows were significant in situating the work being exhibited under a gendered perspective, it would seem that cultural theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha who wrote the catalogue essay was reluctant to attribute any sort of feminist concern to the show.

However, artists had already started connecting to issues being raised by the women's movement, as is evident from Nilima Sheikh's *Champa* series,[119] which drew attention to the issue of dowry murders; a fact still tragically much too common in India. See: (5) FIGURE - 111, (5) FIGURE - 112 and (5) FIGURE - 113. The Indian women's movement of the 1970s alongside sustained media campaigns brought to the forefront issues of dowry death, rape and crimes against women, as well as the massive absence of women's health care. The movement alongside media campaigns effectively managed to imbue these issues into the general public consciousness as never before. Gayatri Sinha asserts that women's artistic practice of the late 1980s and 90s offer evidence of alternative modernisms and *other feminisms* specific to women of the South or the Third World.

[119] https://www.gallerychemould.com/artists/nilima-home/

https://artuk.org/discover/stories/nilima-sheikhs-dark-tale-of-an-arranged-marriage

> The extent of their artistic embrace was wider, compelled by the politics of a region of fraught cartographies. Beneath the fabric of civility spread and laid out by *modernity* of the new nation, incipient movements had started to rise. Other than issues of gender and colour, issues of religious and class conflict filter through and colour their work (Sinha G. , 2019, p. 54).

The early 1980s also witnessed the formation of the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) of South Asian intellectuals including eminent figures such as Sumit Sarkar and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, amongst others. Established by Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha, SSG's increasing influence helped bring to light hitherto hidden minority and vernacular histories, highlighting new perspectives on caste and religion. Sinha asserts that the research and studies of the SSG raised uncomfortable questions on the readings of religious practices that "change unalterably when seen through the prism of caste. Implicit in the explorations of subaltern studies was the class/caste paradigm, and within it the location of gender" (Sinha G. , 2019, p. 54).

Deeptha Achar further argues that the consolidation of the definition of the *Indian Woman Artist*, within the sphere of modern Indian art, was achieved specifically in the context of the women's movement's success in redefining popular culture and perceptions regarding women. The new visibility that was being given to the issues of violence suffered by women, especially in the

domestic sphere of their own homes became highly relevant to the construct of the women artist. See: (5) FIGURE - 111, (5) FIGURE - 112 and (5) FIGURE - 113.

In referring to the emergence of the Indian woman artist, Deeptha Achar asserts "The category seems to have emerged across a range of factors, partly art-institutional, partly art-historical/art-critical and certainly in conjunction with feminist thought and the women's movement in India while having a quite decisive effect on the art market" (Achar, 2015, p. 198). Following the women's movement's inception in the 1970s where the main focus was on violence against women, namely dowry deaths and rape; the 1980s movement saw an expansion of concerns and deeper probing and understanding of the complexities of women's issues. This effectively shifted the discourse to a range of interconnected questions with an arguably explicit feminist ideology; permitting a more intricate and comprehensive understanding of women's issues. The variations and additions to the concerns of the women's movement of the eighties generated new feminist interests in the arts and art history, as can be seen from, for example, the publications by Susie Tharu and K, Lalita, whose work has been amply cited in this study[120]. Deeptha Achar asserts that:

> Tharu and K. Lalita were setting out a position which strained against simple notions of loss and recovery of women's cultural productions and,

[120] See: (Tharu & Lalita, 1991); (Tharu & Lalita, 1993).

> more importantly, sought to work through 'the problem that arises as the concept of experience which, in feminist practice, has a critical deconstructive charge, is uncritically conflated with an empiricist privileging of experience as the authentic source of truth and meaning'. It is in these moves to work out an aesthetic of the personal that engaged with the themes of the women's movement that one could productively locate the consolidation of the category *Indian woman artist* in the 1980s (Achar, 2015, p. 201).

Meanwhile, the diverse factors that were brewing in conjunction; the SSG studies program, the increasing outpour of post-colonial writing, and the revelation of hitherto hidden histories, poetry and alternative narratives, resulted in waves and influences that opened up clear spaces for the introduction of women's perspectives. Sinha states that

> In a perverse way, the nationalist argument of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the unchanging and *pure* Indian woman was to become a provocation that artists unpacked and redressed, tossing the gaze back across the centuries, addressing texts, codes and the idea of the idealized feminine (Sinha G. , 2019, p. 55).

From the 1980s onwards there were a number of exhibitions showcasing Indian women artists. Amongst them, of major significance was *Indian Women*

Artists at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi held in 1986. This was a show that presented seventy seven art works by forty three artists.[121] The USSR Festival of India was also organised to showcase women's art practices. It is clear that alongside the above shows, the efforts of artists such as Anupam Sud, Gogi Saroj Pal, Arpana Caur, Navjot Altaf, Rekha Rodwittiya and N. Pushpamala, amongst others mentioned previously, were critical in the context of the development of the classification of *Indian women artists.* These were artists who had in some cases openly declared themselves as feminists and engaged with feminist thought, or, in other cases, had been using gendered subjects in their work since as far back as the 1970s.

[121] The exhibition catalogue offers brief introductions to the participating artists by the gallery director Anish Farooqui; and the cover design is an untitled piece by Anjolie Ela Menon.

(5) FIGURE - 111 A, B, C & D

Nilima Sheikh (1984-85) *Champa Series, (When Champa Grows Up).* [Watercolour on paper]. First four of a series of twelve paintings based on Champa's life; depicting different periods before and after an arranged marriage which culminates in her murder by her in-laws, in what is vulgarly known as *dowry death*. Courtesy of New Walk Museum & Art Gallery; ©Nilima Sheikh.

A – *Champa, before Her Marriage, and with Her Mother.*
B – *Champa, on the Swing, a Traditional Motif of Love and Girlhood, on the Eve of Her Marriage.*
C – *Marriage and Departure to the Family In-Laws' Village.*
D – *Arrival and Welcome, 'aarti' at the In-Laws and the Kitchen, the Bride's Place.*

Retrieved from: https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/search/actor:sheikh-nilima-b-1945-70502/view_as/list/page/1

(5) FIGURE - 112 A, B. C & D

Nilima Sheikh (1984-85) *Champa Series, (When Champa Grows Up).* [Watercolour on paper]. Fifth to eighth painting of a series of twelve paintings based on Champa's life; depicting different periods before and after an arranged marriage which culminates in her murder by her in-laws, in what is vulgarly known as *dowry death*. Courtesy of New Walk Museum & Art Gallery; ©Nilima Sheikh.

A – *The Womenfolk of the House Inspect Champa, the New Bride*.
B – *Conflict between the Daughter-in-Law and Mother-in-Law, while the Husband Enjoys a Rest.*
C – *Tensions in the Household and Persecution of the New Bride*.
D – *The Husband, Sister-in-Law and Mother-in-Law Plot to Kill Champa, while She Dozes Battered and Exhausted from the Chores Given to Her, in the Kitchen.*

Retrieved from: https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/search/actor:sheikh-nilima-b-1945-70502/view_as/list/page/1

(5) FIGURE - 113 A, B, C, & D

Nilima Sheikh (1984-85) *Champa Series, (When Champa Grows Up).* [Watercolour on paper]. Ninth to Twelfth painting of a series of twelve paintings based on Champa's life; depicting different periods before and after an arranged marriage which culminates in her murder by her in-laws, in what is vulgarly known as *dowry death*. Courtesy of New Walk Museum & Art Gallery; ©Nilima Sheikh.

A – *Conspiracy to Murder while Champa Works in the Kitchen*.
B – *Fire and Smoke from the Kitchen*.
C – *Champa's Funeral Pyre*.
D – *Ritualised Mourning, Marshia*.

Retrieved from: https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/search/actor:sheikh-nilima-b-1945-70502/view_as/list/page/1

In the beginning, when these shows as well as other government sponsored initiatives were first being organised, it would seem that in terms of art historical discourse they were perceived and classified simply within the modernist paradigm. "I have been called an expressionist. As far as I know, artists who have dealt with the human body, human relationships and even objects fabricated by human beings are clubbed under the title of expressionism" (Malani, 1982, p. 42). In theorising on Nalini Malani's work in the landmark show *Pictorial Space, A Point of View in Contemporary Indian Art*, that she herself organised and curated in 1978, at the *Lalit Kala Akademi* in New Delhi, Geeta Kapur states "Nalini paints alienated, deeply introverted, possibly psychotic persons and the space, therefore, is a private one, a sealed, dimlit, [sic] chamber […]. Since Nalini is concerned with psychological metamorphosis, her point of reference is Francis Bacon," (Kapur, 1977-1978, p. 22). However, just a few years later in 1982, in the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (MMAO) exhibition catalogue, *India: Myth and Reality;* Kapur writes,

> It should be emphasised that Nalini's paintings are a woman's paintings. They give us the benefit of a woman's perception of the world and her experience of it. Having in the first phase of her work extracted from her bosom the image of the persecuted woman (Kapur, 1982, p. 67).

Some years later, in the 1990s, Kapur wrote of Nalini Malani's work again; this time in the original draft of her extremely influential breakthrough essay – cited earlier in this study, – *Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work*. She states,

> Nalini began when still young, in the early 1970s, to introduce female trauma as the subject of her otherwise conventionally expressionist painting. Gradually the masochistic injunctions of a body receptive to violence were worked out into an experience of female being as survivor (as cited in Achar, 2015, p. 205).

Deeptha Achar states that the delay in recognising the clear feminist agenda of many Indian women artists was possibly due to the fact that "the theories of the avant-garde that structured the understanding of modern art in India were not framed in a way that allowed a feminist engagement to be read as productive" (Achar, 2015, p. 204). However, Geeta Kapur remedies this dearth effectively in her 1990 essay *Body as Gesture, […];* as she presents thematic interconnections amongst at least ten women artists. Her later essays also establish a clear history of women artists' feminist intent, going back to include Amrita Sher-Gil as well as possible common connections across national boundaries, as we have seen in her take on Frida Kahlo.

Geeta Kapur has also asserted that despite the rhetoric of all the main political formations and their claim to be secular and supportive of the struggles of minority communities and women such as the Dalits and others, these minority

groups continue to be exploited communities. Currently, the reality is that there is evidence of an increasing growth of fundamentalism. In the current climate, the left fronts in India are the only "organised movements to speak the language of modernity" (Kapur, 1995, p. 106). We have seen that within this acutely disheartening climate, the 1980s witnessed the arrival of a generation of artists, especially women artists; imbued with new confidence, demonstrating willingness to incorporate politically inclined tendencies in their work.

In the exhibition, *'Tiger by the Tail!'* referred to at the beginning of this study, it might be clear that the tiger as the vehicle of the warrior goddesses Durga, – she has had to tame him in order to mount him – offers explicit symbology of Indian women artists acquiring the ferocious powers of the tiger. As Madhu Bazaz Wangu states, "The tiger looks subdued in her presence. He seems to be under her control. […] the female seems to have assimilated the ferocious power of the tiger" (Wangu, 2003, p. 25). As we have seen, in my definition of women artists for this study, I have included women from within a diversity of categories and fields that may not normally be classified as being within the arts; however, in the context of this study these women comfortable don the category of artists, as agents of change through resistance and activism, in their intent to transform culture.

The question, as Geeta Kapur voices, is whether the issues that are depicted in contemporary artistic language have been received by society, whether these have evolved significantly. Artists bear witness, but evidence suggests that today,

despite numerous movements, ongoing and since independence, despite favourable legislation, despite activism and resistance; women in India continue to face morphed but clearly inherited issues, similar to those that afflicted them over a hundred years ago. In this part of my study, I will attempt to discover and present the feminist critique in the work of a number of artists currently active in India.

In the period before independence, in the wake of the socialist and nationalist movement, a number of women from the elite classes/upper castes joined art schools such as *Kala Bhavan*, the arts faculty of the *Visva-Bharati University*, founded in 1919 by Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan, West Bengal; the *M. S. University of Baroda* in Gujarat, West India; *The J.J. School of Art*, in Bombay, amongst others. As we have just seen, the decades post-independence saw an important number of women artists rising to major significance.

An ongoing question comes to mind in contemplating in India "the rise of female artists as a self-conscious group" (Mitter, 2001, p. 226). Clearly the objectives and issues addressed by women artists are quite distinct from their male contemporaries, however, in the Indian context, there is the question of whether gender is actually given a foremost position. Many of the artists who have shaped and are currently defining contemporary culture and the Indian art scene still do not see themselves as feminists, some actually rejecting the term outright. Arpana Caur, for example, is known to have on many occasions expressed her preference for the label of *humanist* rather than *feminist*.

Beginning with Meera Mukherjee as presented previously; (1923-1998), Arpita Singh (1937), Anjolie Ela Menon (1940), Anupam Sud (1944), Gogi Saroj Pal (1945), Nilima Sheikh (1945), Madhvi Parekh(1946), Nalini Malani (1946), Navjot Altaf (1949), Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015), Rummana Hussain (1952–1999), Arpana Caur (1954), Ratnabali Kant (1956), Pushpamala N. (1956), Sheela Gowda (1957), Rekha Rodwittiya (1958), Sheba Chhachhi (1958), and Anita Dube (1958) amongst others, are all questionably amongst the most significant shapers of the current Indian art practice and visual culture.

From earlier in this study, we have seen that vernacular/folk artists like the Madhubani painters Ganga Devi and Sita Devi adapted their traditional practices to reach a wider international public. In some cases, younger generations of folk artists continue to be successful in shaping their traditional practices to contemporary demands, thus embracing the possibilities of empowerment offered though reaching a wider public, even as they grapple with the challenges and risks of exploitation that large scale commercialisation represents. The contemporary art practice in India has naturally expanded to include the opportunities of exploiting new technologies and alternative productions which disrupt traditional forms of practice and explore issues of caste as well as gender oppression. Contemporary practices are addressing a variety of issues while also in some cases working across mediums.

Amongst the younger generations we have artists like Anju Dodiya (1964), Sonia Khurana (1968), Mithu Sen (1971), Bharti Kher (1969), Jasmeen Patheja,

Indrani Boruah, Gauri Gill (1970), Jaya Daronde (1975), Shilpa Gupta, (1976) Tejal Shah (1979), and the film directors, Deepa Mehta (1950), Mira Nair (1957), Nandita Das (1969), and Shonali Bose(1965).

For the most part these artists received their education following independence and have benefitted from improved higher education standards and economic conditions. Many have benefited from privileged educations of the highest standard in universities and art colleges in India as well as in Europe and other regions. They have all exhibited internationally and have made important contributions to contemporary art discourses and narratives.

In the following sections of this thesis, I attempt to carry out a somewhat comprehensive study of Nalini Malani and Navjot Altaf, whose work I consider to be of specific interest to the overall theme of this thesis. This interest is specifically as regards the connection to *human rights,* as defined by the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, drawn up in 1948, as seen earlier in this thesis. The political and feminist activism that informs Nalini Malani and Navjot Altaf's work and the quest to advance alternative and transformative realities that guides their art production is what I strive to study in the following pages.

5.1 NALINI MALANI (1946)

Nalini Malani is said to have had the largest number of solo shows by any single artist, world-wide and is also widely considered a pioneer in introducing ground-breaking video medium as part of her art production, (Nair, 2017). This year, Nalini Malani received the seventh edition of "one of the most prestigious and best-endowed contemporary art awards" (2019, p. para. 1). I refer to the Spanish *Fundació Joan Miró and la Caixa* prize; for her

> longstanding commitment to the silenced and the dispossessed all over the world, most particularly women, through a complex artistic quest based on immersive installations and a personal iconography where a profound knowledge of ancient mythologies converges with a bold condemnation of contemporary injustices (2019, p. para. 1).

The 70,000 euro prize money is being provided by *la Caixa bank*, in anticipation of a solo exhibition of Nalini Malani's work at the Fundació Joan Miró in 2020.[122] According to the jury panel – which was made up of the most eminent and prestigious professionals in the current international contemporary art

[122] See: https://www.fmirobcn.org/en/foundation/premi-joan-miro/prize/

world, – they "selected the winner for her prodigious intellectual curiosity, her radical imagination and her socio-political awareness, values that also characterized the work of Joan Miró" (2019, p. para. 3). Nalini Malani has dedicated a lifetime to the portrayal of human and social disorder. Andreas Huyssen states in the 2010 exhibition catalogue, *Splitting the Other,* – see: (5.1) FIGURE - 114 and (5.1) FIGURE - 115,

> To visually render human pain and social suffering, past and present, in such a way that its representation nurtures and illuminates life, rather than indulging in voyeuristic titillation, or succumbing to fatalism in the face of mythic cycles of violence – this, it seems to me, is the quest that has energised Nalini Malani's remarkably consistent body of work since the nineteen-seventies (Huyssen, 2010, p. 42).

It indeed poses a major challenge to present Nalini Malani's oeuvre and do justice to her in the process. I will present here parts of her work that I hope will enable me to communicate the immensely poignant power of her creations and the tremendous effect that her work has on her audience; managing to draw the observer into a mesmerising horrific reality, and effectively leave not a single individual indifferent.

Nalini Malani was born in Karachi, in present day Pakistan, one year before Indian Independence from British rule and the arguably, ongoing crisis of *Partition,* which split the nation into India and Pakistan. The one year old Nalini

and her parents became refugees and went into exile in Calcutta in 1947, before moving to Mumbai in 1954. Definitely, a large part of her work, especially after

(5.1) FIGURE - 114 A & B

A – Nalini Malani, (2007). Four complete and two partial views out of fourteen panels of *Splitting the Other*. [Polytych of fourteen panels, acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet]. Each panel 200 x 100 cm, (Total size: 200 x 1400 cm). Courtesy and collection of Start Museum, Shanghai.

B – Detail of Panel 1. Courtesy of Hatje Cantz Publishers and Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, *Splitting the Other* exhibition, March 20 - June 6, 2010. ©Nalini Malani.

the 1990s is informed by the experiences and traumas of conflict, as witnessed particularly by women. Her own personal experiences of *Partition* during her early childhood have been no less relevant. In a recent interview she states,

> All through my youth, Partition has thrown a dark shadow over my family's life, and I would say, over our subcontinent, till today. My grandfather died a few years after Partition as he could not cope with the new situation. My family landed, dispossessed of all their belonging, as refugees in a part of the country where they did not know the culture, could not speak the language or know the food. From a well-to-do life it became a one-room apartment divided by a piece of *sari* (Malani & Kalra, Nalini Malani, 2018, p. para. 5).

An explanation to the style of painted illustrations and drawings that one would encounter in any of her immense multidisciplinary pieces or her exhibitions is to be found in Nalini Malani's very first introduction to drawing and illustration. She explains

> […] my trajectory into art was through my biology teacher at school. The concept of what is an artist didn't really exist, especially for women. But I was very keen to go to art school; […] she suggested that I start doing medical drawings for textbooks. She taught me how to draw. It wasn't meant to be a piece of art but how to show things, for example, the blood cycle in the body. How do you show how the lungs move and how a

> heartbeat works? You see, she was very good at these things herself, during those years we were allowed to dissect things you see, little animals – pigeons and rabbits and so on and so forth, but this experience taught me to draw. And then, when I went to art school, it wasn't with the idea that I would be an artist but it was more to do with medical drawings, the body, zoology, botany, slicing flowers, and looking at stamens and so on. And this teaching of my biology teacher has stayed with me all these years. Yes, I think it was really excellent, (Malani N. , 2007, p. para. 26).

Nalini Malani started her formal art education, initially studying painting, at Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai; despite her father's disapproval and preference that she studied a *good university degree that will take you anywhere*, – a fact that Malani often recounts when interviewed. As a student she was able to acquire a studio at the Bhulabhai Memorial Institute in Bombay, a privileged space in which veteran artists, poets, dancers, musicians and theatre actors carried out their practices at an individual level and also as a community. This period from 1964 to 1969 was to provide her with some of her most enrichening and informative experiences (Dhar, 2013).

She had the opportunity to interact with diverse artists from a wide range of disciplines and got involved with costume and set making for different theatre directors and their productions. This period also coincided with opportunities to travel widely internationally, through her father's position at Air India, at a time

when such travel was practically inaccessible for most. As a result, Nalini Malani was able to gain exposure to wide and diverse cultures and literature ranging from classical Japanese to Greek mythology, references that show up in her work again and again

(5.1) FIGURE - 115 A & B

A – Nalini Malani, (2007). Six complete and two partial views out of fourteen panels of *Splitting the Other*. [Polytych of fourteen panels, acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet]. Each panel 200 x 100 cm, (total size 200 x 1400 cm). Courtesy of Hatje Cantz Publishers and Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, *Splitting the Other* exhibition, March 20 - June 6, 2010. ©Nalini Malani. Collection of Start Museum, Shanghai.

B – Detail of Panels 11 & 12. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.nalinimalani.com/painting/splitting.htm

.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, Nalini Malani was also, alongside Nasreen Mohamedi, one of the two women to participate in Akbar Padamsee's innovative multidisciplinary endeavour, the Vision Exchange Workshop (VIEW), which he ran between 1969 and 1972 from his Mumbai apartment. *The Rebellion of the Dead,* a major two-part retrospective exhibition spanning Nalini Malani's work from 1969 to 2018 was held in the *Centre Pompidou* in Paris and the *Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea* in Rivoli, Italy. It was a breath-taking testimony of Nalini Malani's lifelong experimentation with diverse media. Film, photography, distinct types and manners of painting, stop motion animation, artists notes, theatre and much more are combined side by side, synthesising, harmonising, merging and dispersing; enabling her to express her quest as well as break stereotypes.

Amongst the numerous pieces on show in *The Rebellion of the Dead*, the viewer is presented with a rarely exhibited 16 mm film of 3:31 minutes titled *Onanism*; one of a series of 8 mm and 16 mm films culminating in a total of three films which were produced over a period of six months during her period with VIEW. *Onanism,* explores female torment with blood chilling sounds and images of violent contortionist movements of a woman who was, a "dear friend from East Africa of Indian origin" (Malani & Jhaveri, 2014, p. para.13) who suffered from mental health issues. It was filmed using a very high ladder, so as to get a top, aerial view of the bed. The film was shot in a single filming. Nalini Malani asserts that *Onanism* was amongst her first articulations to portray her ongoing

preoccupation with announcing and visualising with force "female pain, angst, suffering" (Malani & Jhaveri, 2014, p. para.14). See: (5.1) FIGURE - 116.

Despite having received what was arguably a largely traditional education in painting at the J.J. School, this early experimentation with film "radically changed her practice and led to her becoming one of the first female South Asian artists to work extensively with the medium" (Tomas, 2017, p. 4). Nalini Malani elaborates:

> To reach a wider public, I wanted to use the same media that surrounds us daily in the 20th century. My initial works, in the late Sixties and early Seventies in these media, were looked at negatively or ignored by male colleagues at VIEW. As VIEW stopped, I had no access anymore to this expensive medium. It was only much later, with the cheaper medium of video, that I had a second chance to break out of the painting frame to reach more people (Malani & Kalra, Nalini Malani, 2018, p. para. 2).

In 1970, on receiving her diploma from Sir J.J. School of art, with the help of a letter of recommendation from the senior modernist artist S.H. Raza, Nalini Malani was offered a French government scholarship to continue her studies at the Atelier Friedlander and at the Sorbonne in Paris. The years she spent in France were also of utmost importance and were to make up a "foundational period for Malani" (D'Mello, 2017, p. para. 6).

(5.1) FIGURE - 116 A & B

A – Nalini Malani, (1969). *Onanism.* [Black & white film, 16 mm film transferred to video, 03 m: 52 s]. Photograph: © Nalini Malani. Courtesy of Centre Pompidou Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. Collection of MoMA, Nueva York

B – Nalini Malani, (1970). *Damaged Survivors,* [Collage and photogram]. Photograph: © Nalini Malani. Courtesy of Centre Pompidou Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris. Retrieved from: https://artradarjournal.com/2017/12/18/the-rebellion-of-the-dead-a-retrospective-of-indian-artist-nalini-malani-at-centre-pompidou-paris/

In Paris she was free from any specific curricular restrictions to basically shape her own educative program. She got into printmaking and became profoundly involved in Marxist politics and philosophy, Claude Levi-Strauss's anthropology and Noam Chomsky's studies on structuralism. She attended lectures by Noam Chomsky, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and went to film screenings at the *Cinémathèque Française*, where she also got to know the film directors Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker (D'Mello, 2017). Her travels as well as the knowledge and exposure during her experiments in distinct media and theatre in India, the period she spent

in France were all crucially influential on her future oeuvre, as can be seen when examining her trajectory. The catalogue of the *Through the Looking Glass* exhibition – mentioned previously – contains a text written by Nalini Malani comparing her practice in different media to *intertextuality freedom*. She states

> I do believe that it is possible for a visual artist to observe, cogitate, and ponder over numerous ideas and themes in his or her work, using different means, just as a writer's oeuvre may span poetry, play-writing , novel-writing and even criticism (as cited in Sinha, 2019, p. 57).

At the beginning of her career, Nalini Malani began to visit the offices and printing presses of the *Times of India*, observing the work of veteran and talented illustrators and writers in the midst of the busy bustle of exploring and portraying the "identity of the new nation at a moment of optimism – the period often referred to as *naya daur* as in the new era" (Dhar, 2013, p. 57). She began publishing her drawings worked illustrating stories for at least two Hindi magazines, *Dharamyug* and *Sarika*, both of which were associated with the *Times*. Jyoti Dhar asserts that working alongside the writers of the *Times* who frequently used mythological stories as a starting point for their modern day tales was what initially exposed Nalini Malani to the range of open-ended possibilities available in using myths and mythology as narrative strategies (Dhar, 2013). Nalini Malani also made storyboards connected to cinema while maintaining a subscription to the

British journal *Encounter*, edited by Stephen Spender and containing psychoanalytical writings of literature.

During the 1970s and 80s Nalini Malani explored philosophy, literature and myth through emblematic ethereal drawings and paintings in which well-known Hindu mythological personalities as well as western literary characters made their appearances. As such, *Sita* from the *Ramayana*, *Radha* from the *Mahabharata* and *Alice* from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* all served as "extensive lexicon for Malani to cross-reference, combine, re-create and use as points of departure when investigating contemporary issues in such later paintings as *Living in Alicetime* (2005-06) and *Splitting the Other* (2007), (Dhar, 2013, p. 58). See: (5.1) FIGURE - 114, (5.1) FIGURE - 115 and (5.1) FIGURE 117. Dhar also points out that Nalini Malani's contemporaries, like the modernist Maqbool Fida Husain and Gulammohammed Sheikh, also made use of mythology and mythic iconography but they "did not use the mythological female protagonist as a tool to ask probing questions of society in the same manner as Malani" (Dhar, 2013, p. 58).

As Jyoti Dhar points out, like many Indian women artists, Nalini Malani does not normally like to call herself a feminist; however, her work unquestionably addresses issues that are women specific, especially involving violence against women. Huyssen states,

> Malani's gaze is a consistently and self-consciously feminine one – thus the emergence of mythic female figures like Sita and Medea, Akka, and Cassandra […]. Malani weaves from materials past and present. Women

> abducted and rejected, women abandoned, women punished by the gods are counterposed by others who move beyond devastation, (Huyssen, 2010, p. 43).

In the 1990s Nalini Malani became involved in using painting, script, and gesture alongside theatre expression. This was the beginning of her experimental, multidisciplinary projects working with the Indian/French actress, Alaknanda Samarth, on a multi-layered collaborative adaptation of German playwright Heiner Muller's version of the Greek Euripidean tragedy, *Medea*. *Medea* unquestionably remains of extreme relevance particularly today, not only in India but worldwide. *Medea* was originally produced in 431BC; and according to records, was not well received by either Aristotle or his peers, being a particularly provocative play that has generated heated discussion for centuries.

Marianne McDonald highlights that Muller's version of *Medea* – an interpretation that is particularly significant to Malani's multi-layered project –

> […] is about man's general rape of the earth, polluting and destroying it: eventually man will be the victim of the earth he mutilated. […] It is very apt, because it will be the children of the violators that will be destroyed: future generations. This is the world we are living in, (McDonald, 2003, p. 150).

(5.1) FIGURE 117 - A & B

A – Nalini Malani (2005). *Curiouser and curiouser/Alice in Mumbai*

B – Nalini Malani (2005). *Broken Alice 2*. [Reverse painting with mixed media on Mylar]. Courtesy of and ©Nalini Malani.
Retrieved from: http://www.nalinimalani.com/painting/alice2.htm

Nalini Malani's *Medeamaterial* (1993) or *Medeaprojekt* incorporated the wide variety of influences that she had been exploring. The decade was a turning point in her career as her work became more and more imbued with earlier influences, issues of national politics and new artistic media. Nalini Malani's *Medeaprojekt* initially extended over a period of five years, lasting from 1991 to 1996. It comprised creations in diverse mediums including drawing, painting, performance, installation and video and various parts of it have been exhibited in

the *Max Mueller Bhavan* in Bombay, – part of the *Goethe Institute* – the *National Centre for the Performing Arts* in Bombay, the *First Africus Biennale* in Johannesburg, the *Asia Pacific Triennial* in Brisbane and in the *New Museum* in New York.

Her exploration of the *Medea* subject raises questions around exploitation, interaction and interrelation in the globalised context, between the regions of the global North and South or the *developed* and *underdeveloped* nations. In *Medeaprojekt* Malani demonstrates her interest in the questions of alliance and subjugation. The origins of the *Medeaprojekt* began with an installation titled *City of Desires* (1992).[123] It comprised of gigantic drawings of women with livid incensed faces and floating stormy clouds painted directly on the walls of the *Chemould Art Gallery* in Bombay, and floors covered in red oxide powder. The installation was a cry of lament at the destruction of a 200 year old mural in the style of the city of Jaipur, as well as a protest at the increasingly aggressive and loud right-winged Hindu nationalist discourse. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 118 A.

Records indicate that as an interactive, non-commercial piece, the exhibition was set up to attract people from all classes and walks of life rather than just the usual gallery elite. On visiting the installation, the actress Alaknanda Samarth insisted that the piece needed to be performed, thus, began the initiation

[123] Audio: https://soundcloud.com/stedelijk-museum/nalini-1-eng

for the theatrical performance and interpretation of Heiner Muller's version of the Greek figure of Medea; a performative adaptation termed *Medeamaterial* or *Medeaprojekt*.

The resulting theatrical project, *Medeamaterial* was performed in 1993 as a live performance at the *Max Mueller Bhavan/ Goethe Institute* in Bombay. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 119 and (5.1) FIGURE - 120. It was later adapted and developed into diverse and varied installation versions that were exhibited in different locations such as the first *Africus Johannesburg Biennale* in 1995 and also in the exhibition titled *Medeaprojekt* in 1996 in Mumbai. The first performance with the actress Alaknanda Samarth took place in three parts, starting with the audience being beckoned into the building from outside the institute and then being led around the installation and finally to the auditorium. It alluded to the *Medea* myth and also to the conflicts and animosity between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

> Underlying *Medeamaterial's* episodic, evolving productions were several layered cultural concepts. In Muller's version of the story, the alienated character of Medea is used to comment on various problems with consumerist capitalism in the modern world, such as the situation of Turkish migrant workers in Germany; in Malani's version, Medea's relationship with Jason and the killing of her own children were likened to the simultaneous proximity and hatred between India's Hindu and Muslim communities (Dhar, 2013, p. 59).

At the same time as when the *Medeaprojekt* was being conceived and produced, the infamous Babri Masjid riots of December 6 1992 erupted, resulting in the demolition of the 16th century Babri Mosque by Hindu nationalists of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) and the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* group (VHP).

The violence resulted in the deaths of over 2000 people, mainly Muslims, in communal riots that lasted over several months. The dress rehearsals for the theatre adaptation had been finished but the performance was prevented from being premiered for several months, due to the riots in which women and girls were raped and the minority Muslim population became the victim of the devastating massacres waged by fundamentalist Hindus.[124]

[124] For more on this visit: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42219773; https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/12/babri-mosque-demolition-watershed-moment-171205135217086.html

(5.1) FIGURE - 118 A, B & C

A – Nalini Malani, (1992). *City of Desires*. Installation. [Ephemeral wall drawings and paintings, 427 x 1830 cm, site specific work made at Gallery Chemould, Bombay and erased after the show]. Courtesy of Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.nalinimalani.com/installations/cityofdesires.htm

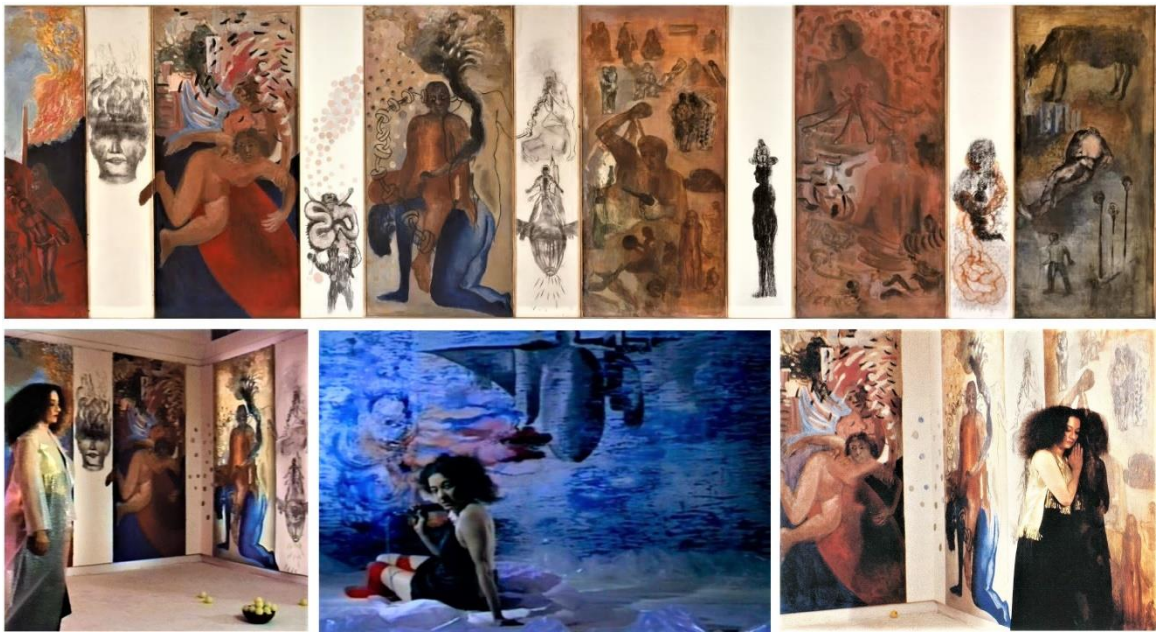
B – Nalini Malani, (1992-2019). *City of Desires– Global Parasites.* Installation. [Ephemeral charcoal drawing] in *The Rebellion of the Dead / Revolt of the Dead Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II*, curated by Marcella Beccaria. In collaboration with the Center Pompidou, Paris. Ending the exhibition, as in previous shows, an *erasure performance* was held, using peacock feathers and with the same number of people as characters represented in the piece. Photograph ©Ranabir Das and courtesy of. Nalini Malani & Castello di Rivoli, Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin, Italy. Retrieved from: https://www.espoarte.net/arte/nalini-malani-lo-stato-liquido-del-tempo-e-della-violenza/

C – Nalini Malani, (2008). *City of Desires – Global Parasites.* Installation view at Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino. Photo courtesy of Apollo Magazine and ©Antonio Maniscalco. Retrieved from: https://www.apollo-magazine.com/nalini-malani-turns-to-a-greek-myth-to-retell-indian-tragedies/

(5.1) FIGURE - 119 A, B & C

A & C – Nalini Malani, (2006). *Medea I* & *Medea II.* [Acrylic and enamel reverse painting on acrylic, 183 x 122 cm]. Courtesy of Arario gallery, Hong Kong and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/nalini-malani/

B – Nalini Malani (1993). Performance of *Medeamaterial* with artist Alaknanda Samarth. Courtesy of: Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.nalinimalani.com/theatre/medea.htm



(5.1) FIGURE - 120 A, B. C & D

A – Nalini Malani, (1993). *Despoiled Shore*. [Acrylic, charcoal on gypsum board mounted on hardboard]. Painting for theatre set of the *Medea* performance (244.0×1074.0 cm). "Medea and the betrayal of Jason her husband, combatting women, and scenes alluding to the encroachment of Western culture, the ancient revenge play is overlaid with the history of colonialism" (1993), including scenes in the last two panels on the right from the Mumbai riots which occurred during production of the play. Courtesy of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan. Retrieved from: https://faam.city.fukuoka.lg.jp/en/collections/6748/

B – Nalini Malani (1993). *Medeamaterial*, adapted from Heiner Müller's *Despoiled Shore*. Courtesy of: Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan Mumbai Retrieved from: https://www.picuki.com/profile/goethemumbai

C – Nalini Malani (1993). Performance of *Medeamaterial* with artist Alaknanda Samarth. Courtesy of: Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://thetheatretimes.com/uprootedness-is-not-always-negative-nalini-malani/

D – Nalini Malani, (1993). *Medeamaterial*. B, C & D are stills with artist Alaknanda Samarth from the 58-minute documentary on the multimedia performance and installation project at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai, in 1993. Courtesy of the artist and Kamala Kapoor. Retrieved from: http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/109/ALookBackThroughOurArchivesFrom1993To2017

By this time Nalini Malani had clearly comprehended the scope of video as a means of experimenting with alternative realities. She had spent time with important women artists who were using ground-breaking experimental techniques, artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith. They all helped to contribute to her becoming one of the pioneers of video artistic expression in India. "Video gave me a way to transport my plays inexpensively with digital actors, as a 'video play' shown on multiscreen projections", (Malani, as cited in Dhar, 2013, p. 59).

The original 1993 exhibition /performance at the Max Mueller Bhavan / Goethe Institute comprised of a gigantic multi-panel painting that took up the whole room in the form of a massive unfolded accordion book, a neon sculpture with two arms reaching into another person's head through the eyes seizing hold of its brain. [125] There was also a projection of 150 slides from two projectors and reverse painting on a Mylar sheet and a bomber aircraft across the wall. The press release for the largest European retrospective titled *Nalini Malani. Splitting the Other* held at the *Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts of Lausanne,* describes the Medea interpretation by actress Alaknanda Samarth thus:

> Medea enters the scene dressed in an enormous coat assembled from large plastic sheets filled with air bubbles. The rushing noise created with each

[125] See also: (Malani, 1996, p. para. 10);
http://www.nalinimalani.com/installations/freetrade.htm

> step sounds as if she is swathed in wind. As Medea reaches the 'wounded piano', which is fully wrapped in broad white bandages, the sound of exploding bombs tears through the production; (Fibicher, Chadwick, Drathen, & Huyssen, 2010, p. 8).

In 1993 as Henri Muller's play *Medeamaterial* was being performed in Bombay under the direction and stage design of Nalini Malani, a dozen bombs actually did explode in Bombay killing and injuring hundreds and leaving the city in flames. The issues of 1993 have never been put to rest and are revived again and again and again…

> The Medea that Nalini Malani brought to life in Bombay embodied myth as stored memory. The artist also connected Medea's persona directly to current events, in addition to showing her genius for prescience. "Open my eyes again to see what I have seen. To see what I saw once", Medea says staring at the audience with wide, terror-filled eyes. The actress Alaknanda Samarth becomes a most sensual Medea. She begins to roll across the paintings with her entire body, as if seeking to absorb or consume the large painted figures, ingesting them like her children, whom she demands back from Jason, back into her womb. With the murder of her children Medea has gouged her motherhood, her womanhood, and her emotionality out of her own flesh. This aspect is brought centre-stage in Malani's production. Malani's Medea also embodies one of the marginalised figures or even

> entire minority groups that society has designated as outsiders, upon whom all that is culpable, incompetent and monstrous, and even what is alien within each one of us, can be transferred (Fibicher, Chadwick, Drathen, & Huyssen, 2010, p. 8).

Hamletmachine, (1999/2000), also inspired on Muller's 1977 play, is a video installation combined with a theatrical presentation that overtly raises issues of Hindu fundamentalism in India while alluding to fascist movements and increasing fundamentalism in regions of Asia and Europe. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 128 A & B. In this piece, a Japanese *butoh* dancer presents a stoic performance while images are projected on his body. New media and video imaging opened up innovative possibilities and Malani began to present studies and narrations of *victims* in contexts of power relation structures. Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha describe Malani's work as eloquently employing "technology (and ideology) of video animation […] to invoke and confront the ghost of political criminals. As sounds and images from the fascist movement in Europe and Japan overlap, the threat of suppressed fascism in India surfaces," (Kapur & Rajadhyaksha, 2001, p. 36).

A painting titled *Global Parasites* from 1995 was also a part of the *Medeaprojekt* – this is a theme that Nalini Malani has revisited in recent exhibitions including more and more diverse variations and pieces of the same

name – it captures the darker side of *development* portraying disfigured and discoloured beings as "the *global economic order* starts dictating power relations in a unipolar world" (Sambrani, 1991, p. para. 2). See: (5.1) FIGURE - 118, (5.1) FIGURE - 121 and (5.1) FIGURE - 122. *Global Parasites: 500 years of Western Culture* is a book by Winin Pereira and Jeremy Seabrook. The book discusses the neo-classical philosophy and structures of competitive trading where market resources and tendencies are optimally balanced to benefit all parties.

Nalini Malani admits that the book, *Global Parasites* has had a deep and lasting influence on her. She highlights the irony of the imbalances in real trading policies that invariable benefit the economically powerful at the expense and exploitation of the other. The overall project is a questioning of diverse social issues alongside modern developments such as the *Free Trade* agreement – the name of her piece in the *Container 96 – Art across Oceans* exhibition held in in Copenhagen. The *Free Trade* agreement, as must be quite obvious, inadvertently translates into exploitation and colonisation. For example, Malani highlights the issues of developed countries using the third world for storage of both human and material resources, as well as a dumping ground for waste and unwanted products. She has also drawn attention to the power play between nations; as Sambrani states, in the *Free Trade* discourse and agreement.

> The worker, whether the traditional artisan physically deprived of her/his faculties, or the labourer bonded to slavery for life, has always been the silenced object, paying the price for the freedom of others. Her work made

> use of illusionistic methods of rendering to represent the cut-off hands of the artisans, an adept handling of the linguistic gesture to speak of domination: a subversion of the code that is the visual language of the historical elite (Sambrani, 1991, p. para. 2).

Her work questions the apparent idealisation of trade, highlighting the exploitation that has always been prevalent in trade agreements. In her interview with curator Kamala Kapoor, Nalini Malani mentions the creation of *false needs* in communities or *seductive trade*. She offers an example of the intellectual property rights of a traditional Indian herbal medicine and insecticide called *Neem (Azaderachta indica)*, that were acquired by the USA. "It is bizarre to think that we will perhaps be buying back Neem products from the USA one of these days" (Malani, 1996, p. para. 3). This piece also draws attention to dubious trade treaties that create exportation deal of luxurious products to impoverished countries, goods which are obviously absolutely useless to the local population but supply the elite rich with western status symbols while maintaining the recipient countries acquiescent to disadvantaged structures of development.

> The broad based idea for 'Free' Trade, is to try and make visible the cross currents that come about through exports and imports, e.g. the addiction to consumerism that has come about in the Two Third World, taking into account the undermining ramifications - including cultural subversion - this could have in the community at large. Take the recent invasion of consumer

> goods: Cardin fashion garments, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Revlon cosmetics and Coca Cola. What use are these in a country where the poor are getting poorer? Historically, we have had the East India Company that initially came from England for trade and stayed to rule India for 300 years. The economic exploitation was begun by them with the deliberate destruction of local artisanal industry. For instance, the hands of the weavers of some of the finest muslin in the world, Dacca Muslin, were cut off by these invaders so that Manchester manufactured cotton could replace it in the Indian market. The threads of that trade pattern and practice still persist though they have mutated with time and have now reappeared in the guise of TNC's and GATT. Meanwhile, the people's real needs are being ignored (Malani, 1996, p. para. 6).

In a lecture series called *Encounter* (part of the artistic endeavour *Conscious Realities*), held in 2013 at *Hoa Sen University*, Vietnam and organised by the Vietnamese *San Art* platform in partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs *Prince Claus Fund*, Nalini Malani elaborates further on her ongoing quest with the theme of *Global Parasites*. She presents her audience with a rather gruesome and aptly distressing example taken directly from nature. She cites a certain species of wasp that lays its eggs directly inside its prey, simultaneously injecting them with venom that paralyses them without actually killing them. When the eggs hatch, the larvae feed on the living prey, first

consuming fat and digestive organs that are not essential for life, in order to maintain the prey alive and fresh as long as possible, and finally consuming the heart and central nervous system. The wasp thus effectively and efficiently provokes a torturous, drawn out, slow death of the victim.

Nalini Malani points out that there is no consolation in believing that such macabre behaviour is limited to the *lower creatures*, instead she emphasises the clear correlation to be found in the manner in which an infinitely refined system of draining the substance from certain communities has been developed to benefit the affluence and material comfort of a minority; absolutely unscrupulous, the system is designed at the cost of utter depletion, impoverishment and exhaustion of the other.

> The powerful parasitical and predatory culture of global capitalism has preyed across the world of the last few decades. In the process, it has sought to devour all other cultures and civilisations, expropriating their substance, draining their wealth in order that it makes itself grow and [sic] comfort and opulence. The toxin that is used to mentally paralyse its victims is acclaim of universality, unique validity and exclusiveness. At the same time, it has endeavoured to teach some of its victims the art of survival, in imitation of its own imperatives. These are the capitalist elites, the internal kind of parasites who prey on their own fellow species (Malani, 2013, p. para. 1).

Nalini Malani has been exploring the above questions since as far back as the early 1990s. In 1991, in *The Jahangir Art Gallery* of Mumbai, under the broad heading, *City of Desires,* she held an open studio installation show in which there was a piece called *Bombay, Alleyway of Lohar Chawl*. This show was arguably the initiation of her exploratory use of interactive audience participation through direct drawing and painting on walls, erasure and loss; with a focus on memory, as well as the exploration of exploitation, and imbalanced societies. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 118 and (5.1) FIGURE - 122. Using the actual gallery as her studio she spent 10 days working and interacting with visitors to the gallery which was open to the public.

She explained her reasons for working directly on the walls as a means of creating and storing memories. "The idea is to remember, to remember these streets and when you go there you might remember what I might have drawn of those streets and to take away a memory rather than an actual product" (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 5:40 - 5:53). In this case, Nalini Malani created her first show that sought to alter the traditional way of exhibiting art in a gallery for an audience; from the normally passive stance of simply viewing the art on display into an interactive experience, where the visitor walked through the ambience of the installation and actually became a part of the action that was taking place.

Lohar Chawl is a specific neighbourhood of Bombay where whole sellers have their shops. The neighbourhood is inhabited by "the poorest of the poor and the richest of the richest" (Malani, 2013, p. min. 3:20). Wholesale products are

sent to retailers and these goods are usually carried by *coolies*, – unskilled labourers – often on their heads. As a bustling and extremely busy industrialised neighbourhood, the streets of *Lohar Chawl* provide a clear model of the enormous hierarchies and wealth disparities that afflict India as a country. *Lohar Chawl* as a model occupied much of Nalini Malani's concerns at the time. She was intent on stressing the realities of the model of *Lohar Chawl,* and that her public would be a part of her installations.[126]

She explains the title of the overall show, *City of Desires,* as marking the particular point in time of Indian history, the period of 1991 when "India changed" (Malani, 2013, p. min. 7:30). 1991 was the beginning of globalisation, a period which marked the commencement of an "immense sense of desire which was the other side of greed" (Malani, 2013, p. min. 7:42). The previous India, which was more akin to the Soviet Block, began to morph into a liberal capitalist system, in imitation of the American model. Suddenly, consumerism began to take over; there were goods coming in, and lots to buy, shopping malls sprung up everywhere and it appeared as if "the desire to acquire things was almost like a hunger" (Malani, 2013, p. min. 8:48). What was happening here tied in precisely with Nalini Malani's concept of *Global Parasites,* as linked to liberal capitalism.

[126] See: https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/358.1994.a-hh/

The above situation alongside global occurrences, climate change and the environmental crisis that was looming large led to the production of a series of pieces under the title of *The Mutants*. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 121. The series was a response to diverse issues that maintain in central position the issue of colonialism and neo colonialism, specifically in the context of environmental issues as concerned with developing countries. These were a series of paintings executed on milk carton paper. The 1954 USA nuclear programmes in Bikini that caused the birth of numerous babies with deformities in the *Micronesia* community in the Pacific Ocean, inspired drawings on paper and the wall that spoke out directly against the violence caused not only to nature but directly on women's bodies. Nalini Malani declares: "The woman as de-gendered mutant, violated beyond imagination, has been an ongoing pre-occupation in my work" (Malani & Pijnappel, 2005, p. para. 26).

The horrendous environmental and long term human cost of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident is widely acknowledged. Information came to light about baby milk powder from Chernobyl being exported and consumed in India. The possible effect of the consumption of milk originating from a nuclear disaster region was also one of the initial quests behind the *Mutant series*. It was also a response to the infamous 1984 Union Carbide factory disaster of Bhopal; when a gas leak from the US owned factory killed thousands of people, further affecting the long term health of numerous more. The victims were never properly

compensated, and many continue to await some semblance of justice.[127] In later years, Nalini Malani developed the Mutant series further.

In 1996, the installation *Body as Site* was shown at the second *Asia Pacific Triennial* in *Queensland Art Gallery*, Brisbane, Australia. Here she presented examples executed on milk carton as well as directly on the wall. The show once again recreated Nalini Malani's now signature concept of working to transform public spaces; to convert the studio /gallery into an interactive, accessible public space where the audience reacts and interacts with the exhibit. This simultaneously also raises new questions and challenges for the artist herself. The wall pieces were lit up with ultraviolet light to create an eerie toxic atmosphere, an effect that readily communicated the uncertainties and questions that the exhibit raised. The exhibition ended in 1997 with a performance in which two dancers washed away the wall drawings using milk. Wall drawings and erasure performances became an integral part of Nalini Malani's practice thereafter. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 122 and (5.1) FIGURE - 123.

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[127] See: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/bhopal-gas-leak-anniversary-poison-deaths-compensation-union-carbide-dow-chemical-a8780126.html https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/bhopal-gas-tragedy-1-2-billion-compensation-file-gathers-dust-at-police-station/articleshow/66913785.cms; https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30205140

(5.1) FIGURE - 121 A, B & C

A – Nalini Malani (1996-97). *Mutant* series. Image courtesy of Susan Noyes Platt. Retrieved from: http://www.artandpoliticsnow.com/2015/03/rameschwar-broota-and-nalini-malani-at-the-kiran-nadar-museum-in-delhi/

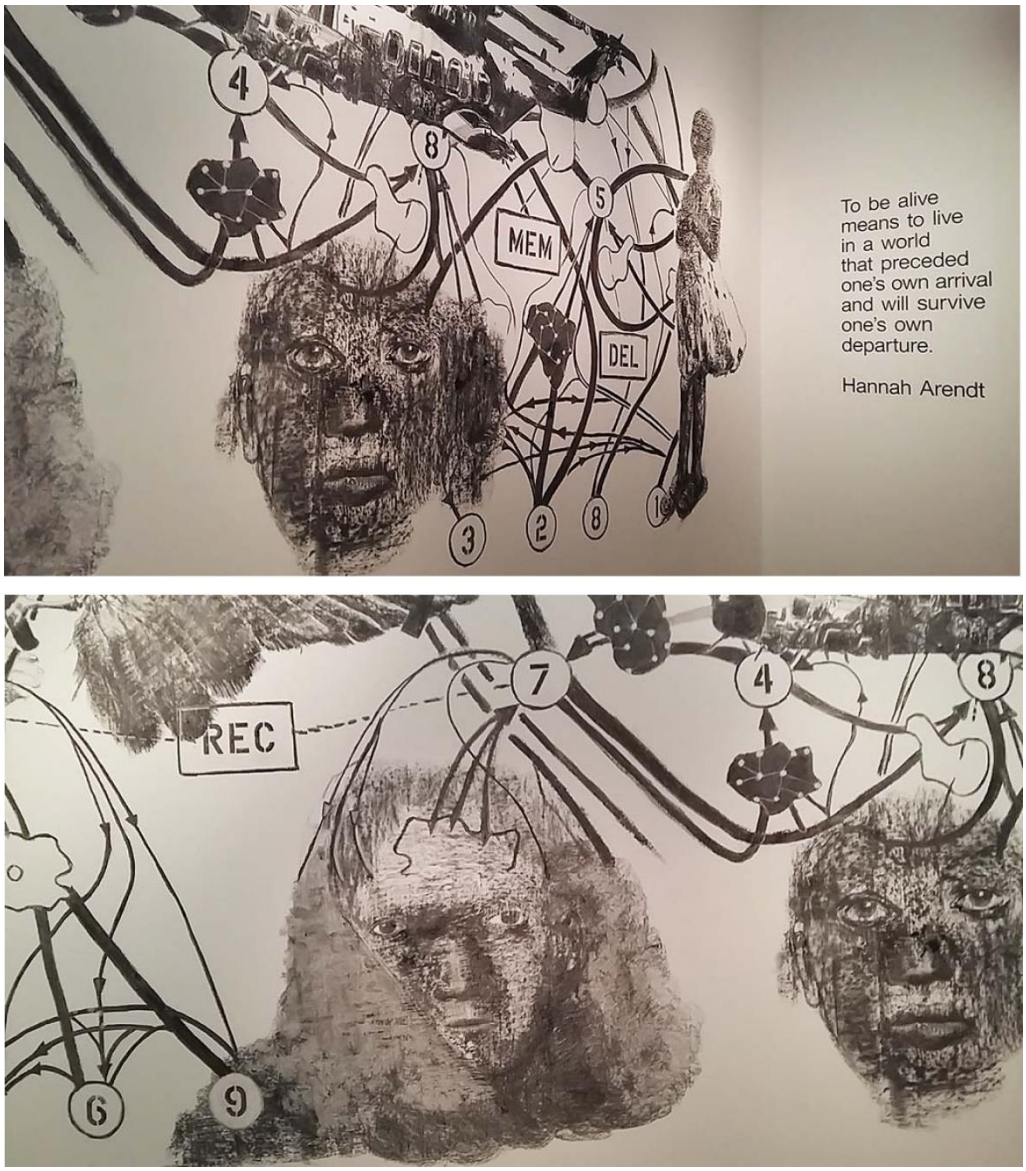
B – Nalini Malani (1996-97). *Mutant* series: *Body as Site: Mutant III Series B*. [Fabric dye painting and milk carton paper, 142 x 96 cm]. Image courtesy of Christine Vial Kayser, (Kayser, 2015, p. 4).

C – Nalini Malani (1995). *Global Parasites – IV*. Image courtesy of Saffronart. Retrieved from: https://www.saffronart.com/auctions/PostWork.aspx?l=517

"[…] based on genetic mutilations caused among Pacific peoples from the Bikini Atolls after the United States used their islands for nuclear testing. Malani has spoken of incidents of 'jelly-babies,' infants born with no recognizable human features, amorphous lives that pulsated for a few hours before dying. Through the Mutant series, and further into her video installations Remembering Toba Tek Singh and Hamletmachine, Malani has engaged with the legacy of technological nightmare at the service of nationalism gone desperately wrong" (Sambrani, 2019, p. para. 20).
See: (5.1) FIGURE - 128 A & B & (5.1) FIGURE - 129.

(5.1) FIGURE - 122

Nalini Malani (2017) *City of Desires*. [Mural drawing for erasure action Installation] from Nalini Malani: *Transgressions*. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. The wall on the right contains the quote: *To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure* (Hannah Arendt). Photo courtesy of Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and Architectural Digest. © G. J. van Rooij.
Retrieved from: http://dev.architecturaldigest.in/content/orbit-fantasy-nalini-malanis-transgressive-play-stedelijk-museum-amsterdam/



(5.1) FIGURE - 123 A & B

Nalini Malani (2017) Detail of wall drawings of *City of Desires*. [Mural drawing for erasure action Installation] from Nalini Malani: *Transgressions*. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. The wall on the far right contains the quote: *To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure* (Hannah Arendt).

Photographs courtesy of ©Wilma Lankhorst. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://wilmatakesabreak.nl/vrouwen/nalini-malani-in-stedelijk/attachment/nalini-malani-muurschilering-bij-ingang-expo-stedelijk-amsterdam-foto-wilma-lankhorst/

In 1996, Nalini Malani created her first installation using light projection onto surfaces through gigantic transparent Mylar cylinders, reverse-painted with mythological figures, deities, animals and women; suspended from above the viewer in the form of enormous rotating mobiles. The light from the video projections bounces off the Mylar while also passing through the cylinders, transposing the video and the cylinder images all around the viewer; thus literally absorbing and sucking the audience into the world that the artist creates. The first installation / theatre production created by Malani using this technique was titled *The Job*. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 124. Malani states,

> […] for *The Job*, I have for the first time made cylinders. The theatre which we were going to work in had very high ceilings and from the highs I had the cylinders coming down. The costumes were changed and the scenarios were changed only through the cylinders. And I made five such, and as these cylinders came down they twirled and formed shadows because I had painted on them. We couldn't travel with this play and it was very difficult to pay the actors and it was altogether difficult to perform in India, so I decided to make video/shadow plays (Malani, 2017, pp. min. 2:57-3:35).

The Job is based on German playwright / poet Bertolt Brecht's short story of the same title written in 1933.[128] Created in 1996, it was shown that year running until at least 1997 at the *National Centre for Performing Arts* in Mumbai and again in 2010 at Lausanne for her retrospective.[129] Malani was inspired to use Brecht's story as acknowledgement of the numerous desperate women roaming the streets of Mumbai. Apparently she heard of one who in desperation had almost literally recreated Brecht's story, having disguised herself as a night watchman in order to fill her husband's position after his death.

The Sacred of the Profane, see: (5.1) FIGURE - 125 A, B, C & D, was an installation that arouse from the increasing fundamentalism demonstrated by leaders of right-winger political parties who seek to change the core concept of Hinduism. Nalini Malani talks about the unique characteristics of Hinduism where gods are not always good and demons are not always evil. "There is a cross-over that takes place which is interesting and playful" (Malani, 2013, p. min. 15:55). The fundamentalist Hindu political parties doctrine aims to *cleanse* the religion of the aspects of the religion that cause them discomfort; specifically the erotic and sexual characteristics of Hinduism, evident in Tantric and Kamasutra mythology.

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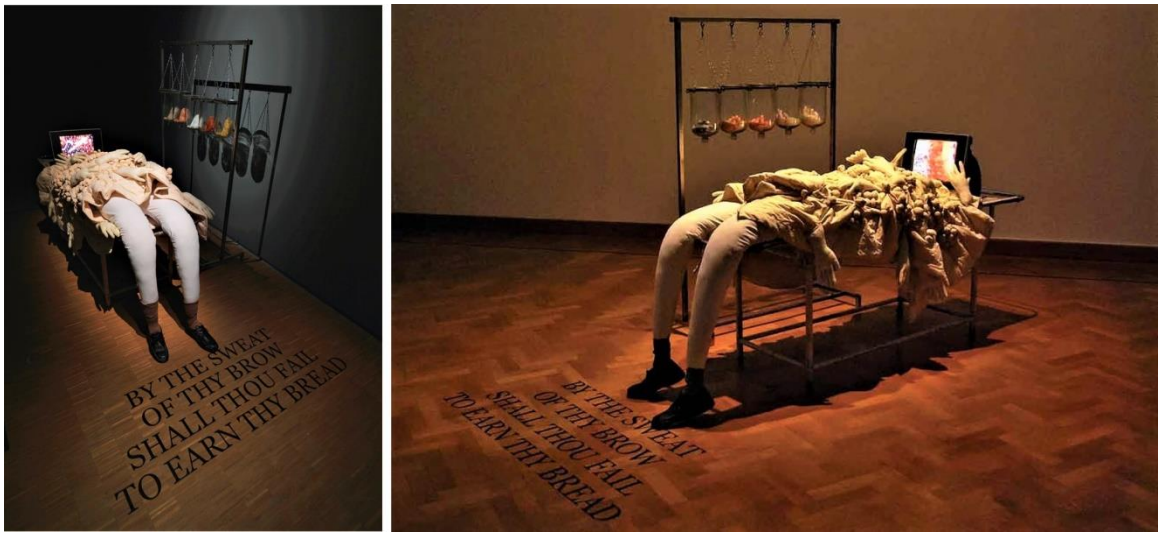
[128] See: (Wallace, Giles, & Livingstone, 1998)

[129] See: http://www.nalinimalani.com/theatre/job.htm;
https://drive.google.com/filtheme/d/0B6Y1Eha5uCajSUlZUkZuNjBPeUU/edit



(5.1) FIGURE - 124

Nalini Malani (1997) *The Job*. Installation view. [Single-channel video sculpture, stop-motion animation, sound, 10:00 min. Cloth puppet on metal hospital bed and monitor. Metal construction, five bell jars with transparent gloves filled with the basic elements of an Indian meal: rice, lentils, salt, turmeric, chili powder, digital video and vinyl text on the floor]. Courtesy of Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne. Photo by Philippe Migeat. ©Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne. Retrieved from: http://artsatva.com/06-nalini-malani-the-job-1997/ https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201802/nalini-malani-73696

In *The Sacred of the Profane*, Malani demonstrates her use of diverse literary traditions, mythology and personal experiences to create flowing multivalent experiences, quite different from her previous pieces. Here she combines paintings on large rotating Mylar cylinders and light that create continually changing shadows on the walls. The images painted on the Mylar cylinders come from Hindu scriptures of erotic tales of demons, gods, goddesses

and their consorts. *The Sacred of the Profane* installation was amongst the first of Nalini Malani's now easily recognisable signature *Video/shadow play* pieces.[130]

Video/shadow play is a genre description that Nalini Malani uses to refer to her work in this media. Shadow play as an artistic medium for creative expression has a long tradition in diverse cultures such as Cambodia, China, Indonesia and Thailand. "It uses shadows, puppets and gestures in an ancient form of storytelling without words, a form of *light writing*. Combining contemporary and archaic projection practices, *In Search of Vanished Blood* creates its own archive of cinematic devices from different cultures", (Benthien, Lau, & Marxsen, 2019, p. 265). Nalini Malani uses shadow play as a disruptive device, "to create a flash of recognition in the Now" (Huyssen, as cited in Benthien et al., 2019, P. 266). Malani herself describes her work process thus:

> The first layering that I give to my video work must seduce the audience, draw it in, and attract enough for people to enter. I work between the scratch and graffiti (to paraphrase Heiner Mueller), or between the cathartic and the expressionistic (to paraphrase Antonin Artaud). My video works that incorporate shadows play with the physicality of video as light. This light 'illuminates' the image but also creates a shadow image! This is where the reverse painted transparent cylinders have their interface and while

[130] See: https://vimeo.com/188108367

> rotating the video light is effaced. Thus in "Game Pieces" the horror of the nuclear bomb explosions are continually wiped out with the quirky little creatures in the cylinders. As the device continues to fascinate I can slip in political quips and statements into the structure. (Malani & Pijnappel, 2005, pp. para. 11-13).[131] See: (5.1) FIGURE - 125 A, B, C & D.

In her use of Greek and Hindu mythological figures such as Sita and Medea, Nalini Malani highlights the parallels that she seeks to find between the two cultures. In the use of mythology she aims "to foreground the female principle" (Malani, 2013, p. min. 19:44). Her pieces are often made up of comparative studies of mythological women such as for example, *Sita*, from the *Ramayana* and *Medea* from Greek mythology. Nalini Malani's book made up of forty- two paintings that were made into the book is titled *Listening to the Shades*, with text by Robert Storr.

[131] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vggoYa5Wp4


(5.1) FIGURE - 125 A, B, C & D

A – Nalini Malani, (2001). *Transgressions*. [Video/shadow play]. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://www.artsy.net/show/stedelijk-museum-amsterdam-nalini-malani-transgressions

B – Nalini Malani, (1998). *The Sacred and The Profane*. [Synthetic polymer paint on mylar, steel, nylon cord, electric motors, lights and hardware. 30 m x 50 m x 110 m]. Retrieved from: https://volte.in/category/shadow-plays/


C – Nalini Malani, (2012). *In Search of Vanished Blood*. [Video/shadow play]. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co. New York and Paris. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://artreview.com/features/ara_winter_2017_feature_nalini_malani/

D – Nalini Malani, (2012). *In Search of Vanished Blood*, [6-channel video installation / game of shadows, reverse painting on 5 rotating mylar cylinders, 4 rpm, sound / 6 channel video, 11:00 min., variable dimensions]. ©Nalini Malani. Courtesy of Burger Collection, Hong Kong. Retrieved from: https://www.espoarte.net/arte/nalini-malani-lo-stato-liquido-del-tempo-e-della-violenza/

Listening to the Shades is based on the Greek mythological character of *Cassandra,* as portrayed and inspired by the writings of Christa Wolf. *Cassandra* had the gift of prophecy but had been cursed by *Apollo* to be ignored and disbelieved because she refused to succumb to his desires. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 126 A, B, C & D and (5.1) - FIGURE 127 A, B, C & D.

Listening to the Shades touches on the fragmented women's revolution; recreating suggestions of contemporary obstacles and dilemmas that women continue to encounter. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 126 A, B, C & D, (5.1) - FIGURE 127 A, B, C & D. Realities that are evident in the numerous unresolved challenges women face in societies world-wide.

> The shades are these creatures that are in the ground, and there was a moment in the history of civilization that matriarchy turned to patriarchy, and that was the moment when large numbers of mythic female creatures were confined to the earth. (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 24:25-24:45).

Listening to the Shades also alludes to the recipe for disaster policies and development projects that continue to be implemented and enforced, despite the obvious and inevitable evidence of impending doom.

> We all know that nuclear disasters do take place in nuclear power plants and yet we go ahead and build them. Things of this nature we know are going to lead to disasters and yet we carry on […]. Here is the figure of

> Cassandra trying to blow life into the spinal cord with war planes buzzing around her head. For me the Cassandra myth is still a very vital one and for me mythic personages bring into the contemporary stories which can once again tell those universal truths that the myth has already brought these centuries before us. They are in the sense crucibles of truth that have come to us through vast filters of civilization and even till today I think that they form the link language amongst us and so I find that a very vital part of our civilization (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 27:00-27:17; 28:06-29:03).

In reference specifically to her position against nuclear disaster, Nalini Malani held a major show in the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai in 1999. Amongst her most powerful pieces, her work here is an unrelenting reminder of the looming threat of nuclear and environmental devastation on a global scale.

Considering the ongoing tensions and unending nuclear race and threatened conflict between India and Pakistan, her position becomes highly relevant. Geeta Kapur states that Nalini Malani's "end-of-century contribution to modern art is an elaborate video installation titled *Remembering Toba Tek Singh"* (Kapur, 2005, p. 95). *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* made use of material from the films that she had produced when working with Akbar Padamsee in the VIEW workshop. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 129. The installation comprised of twelve monitor screens showing scenes of religious and ethnic clashes with bomb explosions and "the retraction into the womb of traumatised infants" (Kapur, 2005, p. 95).

Remembering Toba Tek Singh focused specifically on the horrors of nuclear poisoning and the destruction of national boundaries alongside the massive movement of refugees across continents.

(5.1) FIGURE - 126 A, B, C & D

Nalini Malani, (2008). *Listening to the Shades*. Detail: 4 panels out of 42. [Acrylic, Ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet with audio. 54 x 73.6 each]. Courtesy of Arario gallery and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.nalinimalani.com/painting/shades.htm http://burgercollection.com/welcome/artists/artist/contact1439.Malani-Nalini.html

(5.1) - FIGURE 127 A, B, C & D

Nalini Malani, (2008). *Listening to the Shades*. Detail: 4 panels out of 42. [Acrylic, Ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet with audio. 54 x 73.6 each]. Courtesy of Arario gallery and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://burgercollection.com/welcome/artists/artist/contact1439.Malani-Nalini.html

"The gap in understanding between Pakistan and India, and the vulnerability of ordinary people in the face of geopolitical moves, are manifest in Malani's installation," (Turner & Webb, 2016, p. 160). Three mammoth wall projections inundated viewers with huge images of the United States' bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; alongside animations created using Malani's drawings,

showing highly disturbing images of deformed figures that evoke the horrors of nuclear poisoning.

The space holding the installation was suffused with a cold blue glow that added to the apocalyptic atmosphere of the installation. There was also a mirroring system on the floor area which created reflections of the spectators as they walked around within the enclosure of the installation. Nalini Malani states,

> It was like exploding cinema. The link language I used was the story of Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hasan Manto, which children in India and Pakistan know very well. That was the verbal link to the public. But the work was about the effect of the nuclear testing in Pokhran, Rajasthan. I had a lot of archival footage from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki episodes, so that brought home the message regarding the impact of nuclear disaster. That was why I chose this medium and chose to show it in such a public space, (Malani & Rajgopal, 2014, p. para. 10).

The short story of *Toba Tek Singh* was written by the acclaimed Urdu playwright and author, Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), and was published the same year of his death. It is a commanding satire about the relationship and repatriations between India and Pakistan, following independence.

(5.1) FIGURE - 128 A & B

A – Nalini Malani, (2000). *Hamletmachine*.

B – Nalini Malani, (2017). *Hamletmachine, The Rebellion of the Dead: Part 1*.

All images courtesy of Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://www.art-it.asia/en/u/admin_ed_feature_e/uwjlecoctv07qxvdeign

A & B – [Four channel video-theatre, sound, 20 min. looped sound, three video projections on 330 x 440 cm screens, one projected video on white salt platform, 360 x 270 cm. Black reflective floor].
©Nalini Malani

B – Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co. New York and Paris, Centre Pompidou Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris & Arario Gallery. Retrieved from:http://www.galerielelong.com/artists/nalini-malani/slideshow?view=slider#7 https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/nalini-malani-oeuvre-entre-experience-intime-tourments-de-lhistoire/

The story of *Toba Tek Singh* follows the movements of a Sikh inmate of a mental institution in Lahore, Pakistan. Bishan Singh, who hails from a village called Toba Tek Singh, which happens to be in Pakistan, is deported to India as he is a Sikh. He is unwilling to leave the area where his village is located, in this case, Pakistan, and ends up throwing himself prostrate in the *no man's land* between the barbed wire border fences of the two counties. [132]

> Geeta Kapur highlights that *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* is a response to the nuclearisation of India and Pakistan; the bombs make more belligerent the communal call of ruling right-wing parties. The story and the installation, which includes archival footage on India, Pakistan, Palestine, Bosnia, works as an allegory of the war victims and refugees of the 20th century (Kapur, 2005, pp. 96-97).

Kapur further asserts that *Toba Tek Singh* also transfers "subjective masochism to systematically perpetrated ecological evil across the globe" (Kapur, 2005, p. 95). The piece has been informed by victims of chemical fallout, who are also metaphors of past and current systems of imperialism and supremacies, as well as the caprices of globalisation.

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[132] See: (Manto & Naqvi, 2007)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAmaZr3Wbhs

(5.1) FIGURE - 129

Nalini Malani, (1998). *Remembering Toba Tek Singh.* [Video Installation]. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co. New York and Paris. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://artreview.com/features/ara_winter_2017_feature_nalini_malani/

Continuing with her inspirations on the character of Casandra, Nalini Malani created what is perhaps her largest work to date, the monumental, expansive multi-media installation titled, *In Search of Vanished Blood*.[133] It was a part of a larger series and was initially created for the 2012 *Documenta 13*, show

[133] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uK9iRoPds8

in Kassel, but has been exhibited in numerous different settings. The particular characteristics of Nalini Malani's oeuvre means that each show is unique and the same installations in different venues takes on different features in tune with the space that is to house the piece.

In Search of Vanished Blood consisted of diverse shadow plays, almost like a video freeze projected all along the ceiling of the space of display. It is made up of five enormous, reverse painted rotating Mylar cylinders hanging from the ceiling and six channel videos of shadow play. see: (5.1) FIGURE - 125 A, B, C & D and (5.1) FIGURE - 130 A, B, C & D. In this case, Malani also included many additional texts that fed into the ideas behind the work, poems and sub texts that flowed into and through the characters and figures involved; amongst them the title of her piece, *In Search of Vanished Blood*. The installation was designed to be shown in a very precise manner for which the artist had carefully mapped out written and audio instructions, to ensure the correct setup that would maximum effectiveness of the display in communicating the ideas behind the piece, especially the inevitable presence of violence.

Nalini Malani's focus here was on specific categories of violence; violence perpetuated on the grounds of religion and the violence of the victim. As she highlights, there must be other ways of moving forward and reaching progress outside of violence, which seems to have accompanied humanity since inception. Similarly to her previous installations, this one is also designed to draw the audience into the heart of the installation, creating a continuous movement of

people into the space as they are *seduced* into listening and experiencing the story that she is telling. *In Search of Vanished Blood* is amongst Nalini Malani's largest installations and is without a doubt both breathtakingly beautiful and heart wrenchingly chilling. The Mylar cylinders are lit up by video projections while layers of images and script are projected onto the walls surrounding the viewer in all directions. The rotating projections come from a wide array of cultural iconography and imagery, including Hindu and Western mythology as well as creatures and botanical illustrations.

The installation takes the spectator deep into the heart of the most remarkable visual and auditory odyssey. Light shadows and shimmering figures, images of body parts, skulls, scissors, running creatures and billowing smoke, amongst others, float in continuous movement around the spectator offering "a highly immersive, experience in which his or her own shadow becomes part of the installation" (Benthien, Lau, & Marxsen, 2019, p. 266). The light and shadow effects surround the viewer, utterly mesmerising them while also drowning them inside an assortment of incredibly overwhelming sounds; ranging from heart stopping percussion to haunting music laced with poignant voices and eerie cries.

(5.1) FIGURE - 130 A, B, C & D

A, C & D – Nalini Malani, (2013). Diverse installation views: *In Search of Vanished Blood*. [Video Shadow Play]. ©Nalini Malani.

B – Nalini Malani, (2016). *In Search of Vanished Blood*. [Video Shadow Play] ©Nalini Malani. Photograph by John Kennard. Courtesy of Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/nalini-malani-ica-boston#slideshow_48657.1

A, C & D – Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co. New York and Paris and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/nalini-malani/installation-views?view=slider#7

C –Retrieved from: http://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/nalini-malani/installation-views?view=slider#6

D –Retrieved from: http://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/nalini-malani/installation-views?view=slider#5

The sound track includes a synthesizer, percussion, sitar, interwoven with abrupt nondescript industrial like noises that startle the listener into alert watchfulness. Voices of lost souls seem to lament; a women's voice cries out

> There is no sign of blood anywhere.
>
> I searched everywhere.
>
> The executioner's hands are clean, his nails transparent.
>
> The sleeves of each assassin are spotless.
>
> No sign of blood, no trace of red,
>
> not on the edge of the knife, none on the point of the sword.
>
> The ground is without stains, the ceiling white.
>
> Blood which has disappeared without leaving a trace; (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 35:00-35:39).
>
> This is Cassandra speaking in the heart of darkness […]. I reject all the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into poison. I take back the world I gave birth to… (Malani, 2012, pp. min. 1:26 - 2:12).[134]

In Search of Vanished Blood takes its name from Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's 1965 *Urdu* poem, *Lahu Ka Surag* and Christa Wolf's 1983 German take on the Greek figure of *Kassandra* – Cassandra. It was "inspired by numerous

[134] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uK9iRoPds8&frags=wn

literary works of the 20th century from diverse genres and historical and cultural contexts" (Benthien, Lau, & Marxsen, 2019, p. 266). It also deals with the Bengali story of *Draupadi* or *Dopdi,* by writer activist Mahasweta Devi, which has been examined at length earlier in this study. Numerous other writers have influenced the installation either directly or indirectly, including the German playwright Heiner Muller's *Hamletmaschine* (1977), Samuel Beckett's English drama monologue, *Krapp's Last Tape (1958*) (Benthien, Lau, & Marxsen, 2019). All these literary pieces layered into Nalini Malani's installation coincide in their critical standpoint towards particular political systems or positions.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem was a response to the 1965 war between Indian and Pakistan, and the horrendous genocide like killings and riots during Partition between 1946 and 1947. Nalini Malani's installation focuses specifically on violence against women alluding also particularly to the period of partition and its aftermath, issues that she has treated in many of her previous creations as well. However, Malani also asserts that *the monster* – as in suggested and illustrated monstrous creature that wield unnameable threats – must also be understood as an allegory for the government, wealthy Indians and multinationals seizing land which has been the livelihood of tribal populations for centuries. She is concerned with drawing attention to repetitive cycles of violence. As such,

> Her central question is this: how can human pain and social suffering, past and present, be rendered visually in such a way that its representation nurtures and illuminates life, rather than indulging in aesthetic stylization,

> voyeuristic titillation, or succumbing to fatalism in the face of mythic cycles of violence? How can art contribute to blocking the repetition compulsions of gendered violence? (Huyssen A. , 2012, p. 7).

Till this day there are people who went missing, people who died who have been unaccounted for. "Where did that blood go? Who was the hero? Who was the conqueror? […] It is a very tragic situation, so many people have died, but what did they die for? Who is the victim? Where has the blood gone? Where are these people buried?" (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 1:52:20-1:52:40). Malani asks these questions as applicable to all armed conflicts, wherever they may be, inevitably causing vast incidences of trauma, suffering and more violence. The *Urdu* poem *Lahu Ka Surag, In Search of Vanished Blood,* by Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's actually refers to the uselessness of violence. Additionally, *In Search of Vanished Blood,* alongside Nalini Malani's other installations and performances are not usually limited simply to one particular set of occurrences or incidents of violence. Instead, they draw from historical and contemporary questions and conflicts, merging together in quests that result in the artistic creations that we have examined here. Nalini Malani states,

> Cassandra exists in all of us. Cassandra's gift is the gift of intuitive knowledge. But just as Apollo cursed Casandra that no one would believe her prophecy, we to have the curse that stops us from listening to our own intuitive voice. […] At the moment we are living too much in a phallic

> world. The denigration of the female part is counter to anything called human progress. Therefore we see so much violence taking place. […] (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 37:15-38:30). See: (5.1) FIGURE - 131 A & B.

Nalini Malani highlights her interest in portraying the distinct aspects of violence. There is also the violence involved in self-protection, as in the case of the Naxalite uprising in India. In this case, peasants and tribes of diverse regions all over the country have risen in armed protest, after years suffering from government policies and economic reforms that have favoured the wealthy. These are policies that have led to massive exploitation of the poor and lower scheduled caste populations, including displacement and loss of land and means of livelihood due to misuse and the appropriation of vast areas by multinationals. "Some violence that has to do with defending oneself and the other which is to do with defending ideology" (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 39:30-39:37).

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(5.1) FIGURE - 131 A & B

A – Nalini Malani, (2013) *Cassandra's Gift; Connections: Later the Same Day*. B – Nalini Malani, (2013). *Cassandra's Gift; Connections: Memory Record/Erase*. [Reverse painted acrylic, ink, and enamel on acrylic sheet on specially printed Hahnemuhle Bamboo paper, 152.4 cm x 76.2]. ©Nalini Malani. Courtesy of Vadehra Art Gallery and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.vadehraart.com/nalini-malani-cassandras-gift

She also points out her interest in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi. "I am very inspired by Mahasweta Devi's story of the tribal woman Draupadi and her quest for defending her land" (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 40:00-40:13). In the installation, *In Search of Vanished Blood,* Draupadi's arrest by the police who sought to teach her a lesson for her *insolence,* in her daring to stand up to them, is recounted as a voiceover accompanied by the sounds of a sitar and percussion.

> Draupadi was apprehended at 6:53 pm.
>
> It took an hour to get her to camp.
>
> Questioning took another hour exactly.
>
> No one touched her and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool.
>
> At 8:57 *Bade Sahib* Senanayak approached and said 'make her. Do the needful'" (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 40:14-40:34).

The voice continues to recount Draupadi's ordeal as she is raped and mutilated by the officers. However, the story written by Mahasweta Devi and adapted by Nalini Malani focuses on the strength and resilience of the character of Draupadi. Draupadi, the Naxalite tribal woman, turns the tables on her abusers ripping away the remaining of her torn cloths on regaining conscious, and insisting on maintaining her mutilated body exposed. In thus doing, she installs incomprehension and fear in her abusers through the use of her violated body, the only weapon she possessed. Her abused and mutilated body, which was meant to cause her downfall, becomes her weapon of defense against her abusers who find

their masculinity questioned through her stance. "There is nothing historically implausible about Dopadi's attitudes. […] It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could *only happen to a woman* that she emerges as the most powerful *subject*," (Spivak, 1981, p. 388).

Nalini Malani like Mahasweta Devi sanctions the insurgence and thereby, the violence that Draupadi and her people have initiated in defense of their land, rights and their persons. Malani states that it is violence in self-defence, violence as a last resort that she focuses on here. She cites a process she uses, painting and erasing again and again to create a sort of animation. In one particular case, she draws an image of a woman carrying her baby erases and redraws it, again and again, until the baby becomes a rifle.

> This was a painful process, and I had to draw it, […] it had to be drawn. The process of internalizing that transformation, from a girl with her baby into a girl with a gun who joins the forces of the Naxal. The process of taking care of her young one has to finally find another means to take care, and that is violence, (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 43:57-44:34).

It is the armed forces sanctioned by the Indian government, the lawmakers who are supposed to protect or safeguard society who commit some of the most

heinous crimes against women in India. We will remember the case of Thangjam Manorama, examined earlier in this study.[135]

In 2003, the theatre director Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016), from Manipur, produced a stage version of Mahasweta Devi's short story, Draupadi, – from the collection Breast Stories – translated into the local language. The performance caused uproar, particularly the scene in which the actress stripped of her clothes and challenged the officer. Protests resulted in the play having to be stopped; however, the effect it had on the local population was enduring. As Imhasly states, "what Kanhailal had shown was the reality of rape in Manipur, […] by the Indian state" (Imhasly, 2007, p. 102).

Barely a year after the play was premiered, on July 12, 2004, thirty-two year old Thangjam Manorama's mutilated, bullet ridden body was found on a dirt road, hours after she had been seized from her home by Assam soldiers. Her body bore signs of severe torture, including bullet wounds in her genitals making it impossible for a post-mortem to establish whether she had been raped. A few days later, several elderly women on their way back from the funeral, gathered in front of the gates of *Kangla Fort*, holding banners with the words *Indian Army – rape us!* Many of the women lay prostrate on the ground while the others stripped of

[135] See: https://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/india0908/3.htm;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3604986.stm;
https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/indian-army-rape-us/296634

their cloths, standing stark naked, they screamed "Manorama's killers! Come out! Come out and face us! Come out, if you are not afraid" (Imhasly, 2007, p. 102).

The *Mothers of Manorama* – as they came to be known as – caused a huge public uproar, resulting in thirty-two civil rights organisations pooling together to demand the suspension of the *Armed Forces Special Power Act* (AFSPA) that permits the armed forces to indiscriminately *maintain public order*, a euphemism for what is in fact a licence to kill indiscriminately. The Act continues to be effective in certain regions of India such as Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and parts of Arunachal Pradesh in the North Eastern regions of the country.

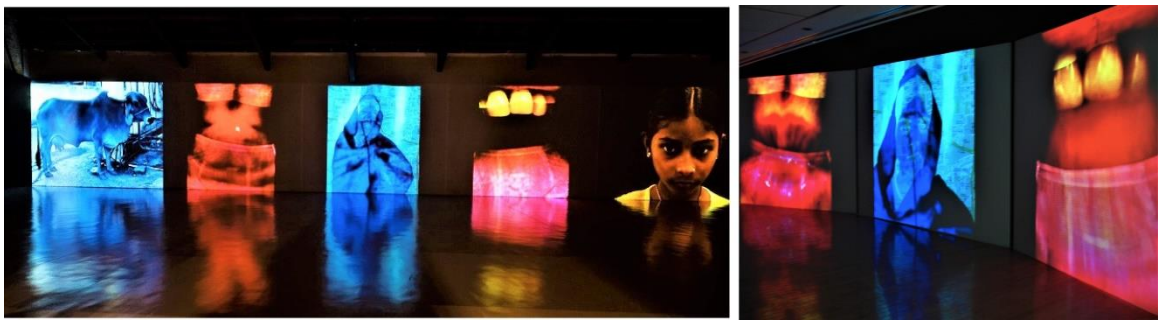
Tying in with the rape and assassination of Thangjam Manorama, and the *Mothers of Manorama* was Nalini Malani's video installation for the 51 Venice Biennale in 2005. Titled *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, the piece consisted of a five-channel video projection emitting footage from partition and the 2002 riots in Gujarat. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 132 A, B, C, D, E & F. Both periods were marked by a horrendous increase in violent crimes that specifically targeted women, involving abduction and rape. The sound track of the emission consisted of a truly horrific blood-curdling scream that penetrated every single corners of the exhibition. In discussing this piece, Nalini Malani states,

> After the caste system, one of the biggest scourges in Indian society is the lowly status of women. In the latter case there is a paradox as she can be swung up to become a goddess, made into a metaphor for the Motherland or

flung down to be the dirt beneath the male foot. My work is inspired by the essay "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain" by Veena Das.[136] […] Apart from the fact that the birth of India and Pakistan was the scene of unprecedented collective violence, one hundred thousand women from both sides of the border were forcibly abducted and raped. As Das says, "The bodies of women were metaphors for the nation; they had to bear the signs of their possession by the enemy". The language of pain as expressed by women who suffered the violence turned into a zone of silence or the "… language having all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meaning. (Das)" Possession by inflicting extreme sexual violence on women has had a trajectory right up to present times. Witness Gujarat in 2002. In a sense this is a work in line with my video "Unity in Diversity" which addresses the dissolution of this very concept that India as a nation state started out with. The language of pain as expressed by women who suffered the violence turned into a zone of silence or the "… language having all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meaning. (Das)" It is this form that I use in my work. Possession by inflicting extreme sexual violence on women has had a trajectory right up to present times. […]The woman as de-gendered mutant, violated beyond imagination,

[136] See: (Das V. , 2007)

has been an ongoing pre-occupation in my work. The Partition led to states of mind where women wove a membrane of silence. What to do with that?! Apart from the signs that marked and scarred the body it marked language as well into another interface: hysterical speech. What caught my imagination in Das' essay was the valence she gives to this particular scarring. The focal point of the sound and text in "Mother India" is the disjointed manner in which women have expressed, or not expressed, as articulated speech the experiences they have suffered through the trauma of Partition and subsequent sectarian violence. How then to recuperate the abject object? How to find a form for this? (Malani & Pijnappel, 2005, pp. para. 23-29).



(5.1) FIGURE - 132 A, B, C, D, E & F

A - F – Nalini Malani, (2005). *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain.* (Viewed from diverse points). [Five-screen, 15-metre video installation].

A, E & F – Retrieved from: http://www.bramante-artecontemporanea.it/it/magazine/nalini-malani-lo-stato-liquido-del-tempo-e-della-violenza

©Nalini Malani. Curated by curated by Marcella Beccaria. Nalini Malani: *The Rebellion of the Dead / Revolt of the Dead, Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II.* September 18, 2018 - January 6, 2019. Courtesy of Castello di Rivoli, Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli, Turin, Italy, in collaboration with the Center Pompidou, Paris.

B – Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://aestheticamagazine.com/disembodied-voices-nalini-malani-mother-india-art-gallery-of-new-south-wales-sydney/

C & D– Courtesy of: Walsh Gallery, Illinois, USA. Retrieved from: https://www.walshgallery.com/nalini-malani-mother-india-transactions-in-the-construction-of-pain-2/

Continued on next page.

From previous page: **(5.1) FIGURE - 133 E & F**

E & F – Nalini Malani, (2005) ©Nalini Malani. Curated by curated by Marcella Beccaria. Nalini Malani: *The Rebellion of the Dead / Revolt of the Dead, Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II.* September 18, 2018 - January 6, 2019. Courtesy of: Castello di Rivoli, Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli, Turin, Italy, in collaboration with the Center Pompidou, Paris.

Retrieved from: http://www.bramante-artecontemporanea.it/it/magazine/nalini-malani-lo-stato-liquido-del-tempo-e-della-violenza

As we have seen, Nalini Malani's work consists of a hugely expansive and versatile spectrum of artistic cross-media that stretches the limits of traditional techniques as well as avant-garde modernism and contemporary practices. Her innovative back and forth blending and bleeding of visual narratives with verbal images, theatre and performance with voices, drawing and watercolour brings forth hauntingly poignant narratives that combine mythology with modernity and ancient cultures with the contemporary. She has born witness to the 1992 and 2002 communal riots in Bombay, the 1998 nuclear weapons testing, the steady and insidious rise in Hindu fundamentalism and right-winged political fanaticism and

the increasingly relentless sexual violence against girl children and women in India.

For more than four decades Nalini Malani's artistic practice has been informed by the issues that invariably affect lives; not only in Bombay or India, but worldwide. She borrows from diverse sources and cultures elements, figures, people, and stereotypes and presents them so that one is forced to question and reassess one's vision and interpretation of these stories, myths and realities. Over the last twenty years her oeuvre has consisted of highly specific signature pieces made up of extremely intense, multisensorial installations that integrate her distinctive dramaturgical aesthetics with a chilling subtext played out by a varied cast of mythical characters. She exploits to the maximum the place that mythology holds as an essential part of conscious and subconscious realities. She effectively explores through diverse forms of the social sciences, using cultural and creative interdisciplinary rational to analyse histories and present her narratives.

She thus responds and negotiates, both colonial and scientific histories in order to put to memory human stories around environmental as well as socio-political events of the past and present. As stated earlier she asserts that much of what she learnt that informs her practice came from the lessons she had with her biology teacher.

> I was very inspired by my biology teacher at school. […] What she was trying to do was teach us the systems of nature and she would draw

> diagrams of how actually nature sustains itself and how ecological balances take place. That's when I first learnt about parasites, parasitical relationships, symbiotic commensalism, and I was fascinated. And this idea of making that which is invisible visible has been sort of a slogan in my head. How do I make certain things visible? What are my means to do it? In one sense, as an artist, as a visual artist I don't have the gift of language, because with language, and the English language especially, it's adding new words, and the words are such that you and I, we can understand each other. […] Finding a visible form for something that is invisible is a big quest; cause for me art is about communication; and it is a three way process. It's the art object itself, myself the artist, and you the viewer. Together we make the art, otherwise it has no meaning, it's just some kind of self-indulgence enterprise (Malani, 2013, pp. min. 1:40:22- 1:55).

Clearly, Nalini Malani has dedicated a lifetime to dialoguing with the presences and absences caused by the incessant violence and callousness that has accompanied man from the inception of human history. She has spoken frequently of her preoccupation with 'making visible the invisible'. To do so she hovers between the lines of the visible and invisible, as she blends history with western and Eastern mythology so as to address issues of urgency with documented facts, literature and the mythical. She uses sophisticated transnational cultural and social knowledge to create a language in the visual arts that is personal as well as

public. Her installations, *video/shadow plays* and performances, including her signature *wall drawing/erasure* experiences highlight the major narratives and recurrent ongoing concerns of her practice. Malani states

> We have been through a time of intellectual and political debilitation in the past 15 years in India. Civil society is getting somewhat unhinged. We have to find strategies and subterfuges to address issues. Notwithstanding the famous statement of Adorno who remarked that "after Auschwitz there can be no art." (Malani & Pijnappel, 2005, p. para. 14)

Nalini Malani is also questionably the forerunner of experimental video art in India and possibly worldwide. She is also amongst the leading artists internationally working within a wide range of multidisciplinary and multimedia practices.

> *In Search of Vanished Blood* further extends Malani's considered exploration of violence, the regenerative power of myth, the feminine voice, and the geo-politics of national identity. […] While referencing the place of women in Indian society, this work translates across cultures and time to other contexts and conditions in its interrogation of issues relating to justice, gender and their representation. (Aukland Art Galeery Toiotamaki, 2012, pp. para. 2-3).

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the poet whose poem became the title of Malani's monumental piece was the father of another woman artist, a contemporary of Nalini Malani's, Pakistani artist Salima Hashmi. She also suffered *Partition* and relocation in her childhood. Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem was written in 1965, after the Indo-Pakistan war. The title adapted by Nalini Malani is reflected in these lines

> But, unheard, it still kept crying out to be heard.
> No one had the time to listen, no one the desire.
> It kept crying out, this orphan blood,
> but there was no witness. No case was filed.
> From the beginning this blood was nourished only by dust.
> Then it turned to ashes, left no trace, became food for dust, (as cited in Turner, 2016, p. 156).

Words from this poem can be seen projected on the bandaged face of a woman's face, alongside the signature soundtrack of haunting music, voices and sounds that accompany many of her installations. See: (5.1) FIGURE - 133 A, B, C & D, (5.1) FIGURE - 135, (5.1) FIGURE - 136 A, B & C and (5.1) FIGURE - 137 A, B & C. Malani asserts that the poem *In Search of Vanished Blood* epitomises in every possible manner not only *Partition*, but all the sectarian and religious issues and violence that plague India and nations around the world. Andreas Huyssen states, "Malani's work since the 1990s must be seen in the

context of a vast, and by now worldwide culture of memory politics – memories of historical trauma, dictatorships, genocide, rape, and structural violence", (as cited in Turner, 2016, p. 157).

(5.1) FIGURE - 133 A, B, C & D

A – Nalini Malani, (2015) *My Speech Is Silence, My Song The Scream of The World* (from: *In Search of Vanished Blood).* Courtesy of the artist. Retrieved from and: http://artmusings.net/pilgrims-in-space-time-identity/

B – Nalini Malani, (2015). *In Search of Vanished Blood. (The rebellion of the dead will be the war of the landscapes).* Retrieved from: http://sfaq.us/2016/09/nalini-malani-in-search-of-vanished-blood/

C – Nalini Malani, (2015). *The two Americas - that is I.* Retrieved from: https://www.lelongeditions.com/en/estampe/537/the-two-americas-that-is-i/

D – Nalini Malani, (2015). *My hope is the last breath. My hope is the first battle*. Retrieved from: https://www.lelongeditions.com/en/estampe/535/my-hope-is-the-last-breath-my-hope-is-the-first-battle/ All images courtesy of the artist and Lelongeditions.

In Search of Vanished Blood is particularly relevant in this context, as a piece that cites Faiz's poem; a lament against war in the east while also alluding to conflicts in the west. As is evident, Malani's overall work is a testimony, a witness of history's tendency to silence through erasure the voices and lives that have been lost to violence; especially women's voices and lives. Therewith the search for forgotten, that is, *vanished blood*. In discussing the question of whether contemporary women artists, not only in India, but worldwide consider the importance of engaging with and visualising issues of human rights violation, especially as regards women and children, as a priority or not, Malani states:

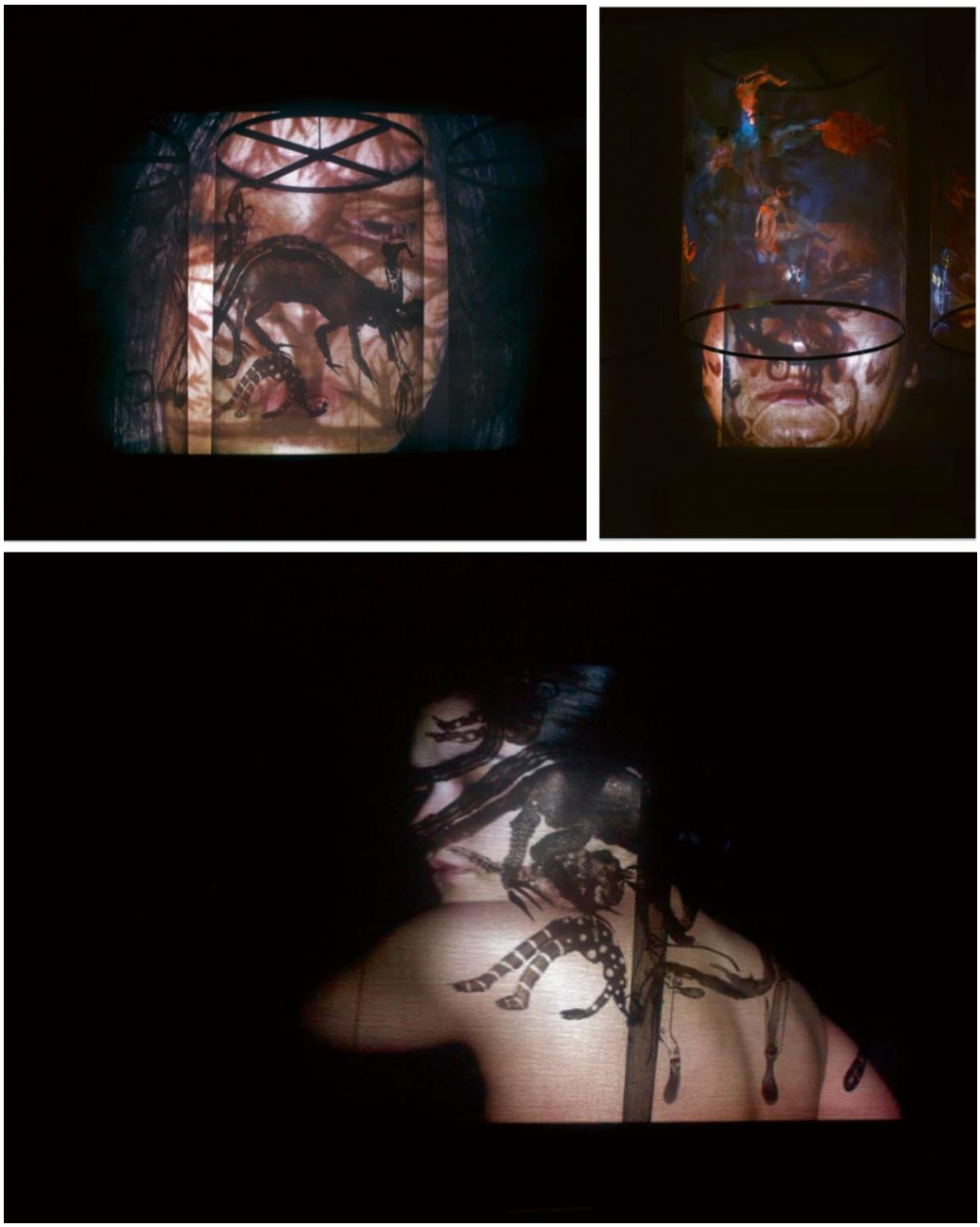
> Following feminist philosophers like Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, I believe that the intuitive part of the mind is coded as female. But this is not a female prerogative; it exists in all of us. Why don't we listen to that? After all, in the aftermath of war or violence it's women who take care of the wounded and mourn for the dead. Maybe if men performed these roles, there would be fewer deaths (as cited in Turner, (as cited in Turner, 2016, p. 158).

Chaitanya Sambrani states of Nalini Malani that "in her engagement with historical discourse, she is part of a distinguished cohort of third world artists who have insistently interrogated the structure of history" (Sambrani, 2019, p. para. 1). Arguably, these are questions that are manifestly vital when it comes to managing the complex legacy of a world that has consciously chosen to ignore and thereby

not to address contentious issues or listen to marginal voices. When such complexities are apparently presented for appraisal, this is only possible if "offered up in a recognizable, palatable guise, packaged into familiar parcels that do not fundamentally unsettle our expectations" (Sambrani, 2019, p. para. 1). In the imperative need to address historical discourse, its outcome and the future, Nalini Malani's oeuvre engages with questions of purpose and representation in the arts in general. She has set herself up as an example of effective engagement with collective and personal sensibilities, memory and consciences.

(5.1) FIGURE 134

Nalini Malani (2012) *In Search of Vanished Blood* (working on her installation in Documenta 13). ©Nalini Malani. Courtesy of Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.nalinimalani.com/library.htm

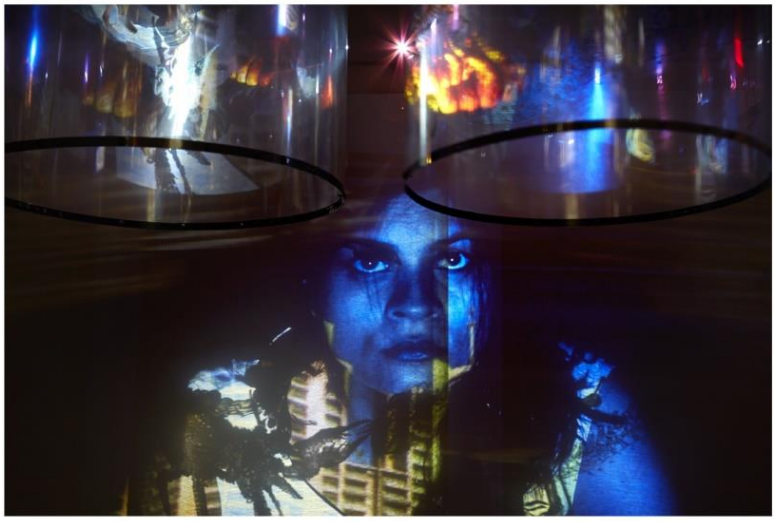


(5.1) FIGURE - 135

Nalini Malani, (2012). *In Search of Vanished Blood* [Six channel video /shadow play with five reverse painted rotating mylar cylinders. Sound 11 minutes and 35 seconds loop]. Courtesy of ©Nalini Malani and Arario Gallery. Retrieved from: http://burgercollection.com/welcome/artists/artist/contact1439.Malani-Nalini.html#

(5.1) FIGURE - 136 A, B & C

A-C – Nalini Malani, (2012). *In Search of Vanished Blood* [Six channel video /shadow play with five reverse painted rotating mylar cylinders. Sound 11 minutes and 35 seconds loop]. Courtesy of ©Nalini Malani and Arario Gallery.
A – Retrieved from: https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/nalini-malani/
B & C – Retrieved from: http://burgercollection.com/welcome/artists/artist/contact1439.Malani-Nalini.html#



A – Nalini Malani, (2016). *In Search of Vanished Blood.* Installation view. . Courtesy of Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston and © 2016 Nalini Malani; photograph by Danita Jo. Retrieved from: https://frieze.com/article/nalini-malani-0?language=de

B – Nalini Malani, (2013). *In Search of Vanished Blood.* [Video Shadow Play, six-channel video (colour, sound; 11:00 minutes) and five Mylar cylinders. Installation view]. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co. New York and Paris. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: http://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/nalini-malani/installation-views?view=slider#8

C – Nalini Malani, (2001). *Transgressions.* [Video/shadow play]. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. ©Nalini Malani. Retrieved from: https://www.artsy.net/show/stedelijk-museum-amsterdam-nalini-malani-transgressions

(5.1) FIGURE - 137 A, B & C

5.2 NAVJOT ALTAF (1949)

> Art is necessary in order that man should be able to recognize and change the world. But art is also necessary by virtue of the magic inherent in it.
>
> (Ernst Fischer)

Navjot Altaf was amongst artists like Nalini Malani, Anupam Sud, Gogi Saroj Pal, Vivan Sundaram and others who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s. She was born in Meerut, a village in Uttar Pradesh. Her parents were Prithvi and Rupinder Kalsi. Her father, who was an accountant during the British rule, was informed by Navjot's high school art teacher of her talent. As such, her parents sent her to Bombay at the age of sixteen to study at the prestigious Sir J.J School of Art. She qualified with a Diploma in Fine arts in 1972 and then went on to study graphic design in the *Garhi Studios* of New Delhi. Here she met her artist husband Mohammedi Altaf. Their daughter Sasha later became an art historian (Milford-Lutzker, 2002).

Navjot has experimented with a wide range of artistic production, including painting, sculpture, installation, art and video; going much further than was the norm to develop collaborations with activists, subaltern or vernacular artists and

whole villages.[137] "She uses her art to express her concerns regarding inhumane working and living conditions, tribal and rural abuse, communal tensions, and the Bollywood film industry's exploitation of women – all of which pervade the city of Mumbai" (Milford-Lutzker, 2002, p. 25). Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker points out that Mumbai is the financial centre of India and also home to the world's largest film industry, Bollywood. Since its establishment as the main port for the East India Company, by the British, in the early 17th century, Bombay has been exposed throughout its history to a highly diverse, extremely rich and wide array of religious, historical and cultural influences. Traders from Arabia, Persia, Africa, China, and Europe passed through the city regularly, leaving behind an "infusion of ideas and cultural values" (Milford-Lutzker, 2002, p. 25). The city's affluence and growth lured people from the rural areas of the country in search of better means of living. The intermingling and diversity of the populations in Mumbai has given rise to what Lutzker describes as "a dynamic, thriving city, beset, nevertheless, with the urban problems of corruption, class, and caste, as well as religious tensions and exploitations of the underprivileged".

The 1970s was a period marked by increasing disenchantment with the Nehruvian republic; evidence of corruption grew, social and economic reforms stagnated alongside unabating poverty and illiteracy levels. However, while the

[137] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8eds_7y3DY

socialist formations were being identified as failed polities, the Left represented the promise of progressive transformation with the Marxist vision providing a stronghold for many intellectuals and artists of the time, including Navjot Altaf. Within this scenario, even while artists were sincerely concerned with social and political change and progress, they increasingly raised questions regarding the "troubled relationship between art and ideology" (Adajania, 2016, p. 11).

Navjot Altaf became involved with the Marxist movement and vision, through the influence of her (late) activist artist husband, Altaf Mohammedi. She met Mohammedi, her future spouse and collaborator during her fourth year of studies at Sir J.J School of Art. This was also a crucial point in her life, when she felt restless and troubled due to the apparent apolitical environment of her art school. Altaf Mohammedi, who had returned to India from the UK in 1967, having studied art in various institutions, including St. Martin's in London. "infused the academically conservative J.J. with a fresh burst of energy, talking to the students about the new sites for the production and reception of art, which had emerged in the late-1960s run up to student revolts of 1968" (Adajania, 2016, p. 30). Through Altaf Mohammedi, Navjot was introduced to new, radical artistic language and thought, such as performance art and happenings.

Altaf Mohammedi had been a vocal activist in the UK, as member of various organisations and movements such as the *Young Communist League*, the youth wing of the *Communist party of Great Britain*, as well as the environment, civil rights and nuclear disarmament movements (Adajania, 2016). As such, Altaf

Mohammedi, who was politically highly motivated and energised by the student uprisings and civil rights demonstrations, the movements for nuclear disarmament, and the movements against the Vietnam War, found in Navjot a kindred spirit who shared all of his interests and passions for Left wing progressive ideology.

As Leftist cultural activists, they were exposed to Marxist philosophies regarding art in the context of society as a whole and were as such plagued by evocative questions such as "Can individuals belonging to different class and ethnic backgrounds communicate, work together, create a political solidarity, and produce shared cultural meanings?" (Adajania, 2016, p. 11). Navjot Altaf speaks of those formative years following her marriage to her activist husband thus:

> Critical review of conventional notions made sense. Living and working together in the same space encouraged communication at various levels – a kind of intellectual compatibility grew, and we could share almost everything, including our differences. Interaction with other artists, filmmakers, poets, theatre persons, journalists, activists, and students of similar orientation in the '70s added new dimensions to life and work, specifically in terms of taking up a political position through choice and action, (Altaf & Balasubramaniam, 2017, p. 44).

As Navjot and her husband began their career in art and activism, they joined the Marxist *Progressive Youth Movement* (PROYOM), an organisation of the University of Bombay that identified with the Communist Party and drew

together students, academics, writers, journalists, filmmakers and visual artists. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 138. PROYOM shaped the careers of leading ideologues of the *Maoist* activist movements, including Anuradha Ghandy (1954-2008), one of the founding members of the Indian Communist party, who was to make major contributions to the *Naxalite* community, the trade union, as well as the *Dalit and Adivasi* women's movements.[138] Anuradha Ghandy rebuffed the option of a simple comparison of caste and class, which was a common misconception of traditional Communist thought in India; instead she strongly emphasized the dire need to fight against caste oppression, long before caste began to figure as a critical issue in Indian politics, especially following the 1990s agitation known as the *anti-Mandal movement*, caused by upper-caste students protests against reserved seats in universities and government positions for candidates from marginalised castes.[139]

According to its members, PROYOM had aimed to uphold "a scientific, democratic, nationalist and anti-imperialist education accessible to everyone" (Adajania, 2016, p. 32). Events taking place the late 1960s and early 1970s resulted in significant intellectual movement around the country which manifested in the form of burgeoning study groups and creative expression in the forms of revolutionary poetry, posters, films and exhibitions. Navjot Altaf combined her

[138] See: (Ghandy, 2011)

[139] See: (Kumar R. , 1993); (Balagopal, 1990); (Chakravarti U. , 2018)

studio practice with actively collaborating with PROYOM. She attended meetings and demonstrations and created a major body of work in posters and illustrations. Navjot thus acquired a special sensitivity towards the predicament of the impoverished as well as the victims of war, specifically the Vietnam War, on which she created a number of posters and illustrations. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 138. In 1989 Navjot created two paintings titled *Screening a Smile* and *Levels.* These were specific reflections of her multiple concerns. The pieces were

> […] complex works that reflect her concern for the anonymous, dehumanised worker who toil in printing sweatshops in dreadful conditions. The men and women function like automatons; they are worn down by the repetitive nature of their fobs, by the chemicals they handle and inhale, and by the tyranny of their bosses (Milford-Lutzker, 2002, p. 25).

Both Navjot and Mohammedi Altaf formed part of the numerous protests organised by PROYOM in the 1970s, as strategies of protest against diverse issues of social and political concern, both in India and abroad. Amongst these were the protests against the increase in students' fees, the structural set up of the system of education in India, the anti-apartheid movement and the resistance against the USA neo-imperialist presence in Vietnam and Cambodia.

(5.2) FIGURE - 138

Navjot Altaf, (c. 1974) *Posters.* [Watercolour on poster paper] (Adajania, 2016, pp. 44-47). Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf and The Guild Art Gallery publications, Mumbai.

The couple were also very concerned about developing strategies to help reduce the gap between art and the public. As such, they sought alternative spaces in which to show their work, making it accessible to a much larger audience than the limited public that would attend the typically elite gallery spaces in cities. They also produced economical screen print versions of their work, selling them for as little as 25 rupees a piece. These were prices that made their work accessible to all sectors of the public, including the poorer populations. Evidence from art critics suggests that Navjot and Mohammedi Altaf also sold their original pieces at less than fifty percent of the prices that most other artists who exhibited mainly in the Jahangir Art gallery of Mumbai were asking (Adajania, 2016).

Nancy Adajania asserts that Navjot Altaf was an exception amongst her peers in being the only artist who ”applied herself in the most dramatic way to

seeking new resolutions for the problem of cultural practice that had preoccupied the Left during the 1970s" (Adajania, 2016, p. 12). Navjot Altaf herself states that since the 1990s there has been a specific interest amongst Indian artists in the concept of *art in public space*. This in turn has led to new art discourse, while also encouraging artists to explore possibilities involving inclusive and interactive projects that encourage participation and dialogue with the public.

In an interview with Chitra Balasubramaniam, Navjot highlights the fact that even though artists in the 1970s articulated through art their protests against injustice and gender violence; this was not from a *feminist understanding*, but a resistance against systems of power. Thus, as Navjot points out, "art criticism with a feminist perspective took root much later" (Altaf & Balasubramaniam, 2017, p. 45). Navjot herself was able to access women's writing from both India and worldwide, she thus broadened her knowledge and interest in the diverse waves of feminism and critical discourses that were taking place in Europe and the rest of the world. She states:

> The emancipatory effect of the women's movement and feminist practices has had an enormous impact on the visual arts. […]. We see this in artist interventions in alternative spaces, in the making of participatory art, and in eco-feminist practice, which includes cross-cultural sharing and a philosophy that stresses notions of care and the interrelationship of all life (Altaf & Balasubramaniam, 2017, p. 46).

The 1990s seemed to mark the period when Navjot Altaf's art practice began to focus specifically on questions regarding the imaging of working class women's experiences. She became increasingly uneasy by what appeared to be a dearth in concern as regards issues of gender inequality within the Marxist and Communist discourse and practice. However, she states that

> PROYOM did engage with gender. We started raising some questions, like why were the women the ones making the tea and washing the dishes? Then I came across Griselda Pollock's book, *Vision and Difference*, in 1988 and I think that was the first time I read a feminist discourse on art (as cited in Kappal, 2016, para. 6); (Kappal, 2016, p. para. 6).

Navjot Altaf thus began her critical redefinition of the representation of women and their bodies, which as Adajania states is "imprinted by the insidious forces of patriarchal socialism as well as distorted by the compulsion and complicities through which women consent to such gender-hegemonic discourse" (Adajania, 2016, p. 99). The concern with social issues and justice accompanies her throughout her oeuvre even as she began to question issues beyond class and caste. As such, her work became more and more engaged with gender issues in accordance with the increasingly feminist discourse of art and society.

Around this time, Navjot created a series of paintings titled *Images of Women,* which were exhibited at the *Prithvi* Theatre gallery – which survived very fleetingly – in Bombay. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 139 A, B & C. The series was made

of up of figures of important Indian women such as the historical warrior Queen *Rani of Jhansi* (1828-1858)– who was amongst the leaders of the 1857 War of Independence battle against British Colonial rule. She also portrayed the famous *Bandit Queen*, Phoolan Devi (1963-2001), who managed to transform herself from child rape victim to an empowered member of parliament in the 1980s. She fought against brutal and inhumane social and sexual exploitation of girl children and women in the remote Chambal Valley located at the convergence of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Nancy Adajania highlights that the *Rani of Jhansi*

> is a historical figure valorised as a heroine of the anti-colonial liberation struggle, the bandit queen was a contemporary personality stigmatised as a criminal or pitied as a victim of caste exploitation. Taken together, these two manifestations of the *virangana* or exemplar of female heroism – a human translation of the sacred archetype of Devi in militant aspect – have dominated the Indian public imagination (Adajania, 2016, p. 99).

These paintings marked the first phases of feminist art production that Navjot embarked upon. The *Rani of Jhansi* image was juxtapositioned with images of the Hindu goddesses Kali and Durga, thus bestowing upon her the divinity and powers of the goddesses. As opposed to the *Rani of Jhansi* image, Phoolan Devi, who was in the press headlines around the country, was portrayed alongside a masturbating woman, possibly as a portrayal of Indian women's

inability to discuss or express their sexuality, which becomes the subject of contentious comment in situations of rape and violence, as in the case of Phoolan Devi, and her role as the Bandit Queen.[140] Nancy Adajania asserts that

> […] in the early phase of her feminist art-making, Navjot adopted the simple and direct address that feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger had deployed to address patriarchal constructs. Not all of Navjot's paintings were successful: it was a difficult mandate to shape a language that could counter masculinist propaganda without falling into propagandist clichés of its own (Adajania, 2016, pp. 100-101).

(5.2) FIGURE - 139 A, B & C

Navjot Altaf, (1992-1993) *Images of Women* Series. [Acrylic on paper] (Adajania, 2016, pp. 98-101). Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf and The Guild Art Gallery publications, Mumbai.

[140] See: (Weaver, 1996)

However, she soon began to depart from painting as her medium of expression getting involved in the combined and collaborative options offered by installation projects.

> Suddenly, I felt that this was not the medium I want to work in, I needed a medium that people feel drawn to, where their voices can be brought in as participants — if not directly, if not collaborative, then at least with a two-way dialogue being possible. For me, that came through installation art and cooperative, collaborative projects, (as cited in Kappal, 2016, para. 7).

Sometime in the mid-nineties, Navjot paid a visit to a village called Shilpi Gram at Kondagaon, in the Bastar forests of Madhya Pradesh. Her experiences and interactions with the *Adivasi* artists and people of Kondagaon le to a large body of work titled *Images Redrawn* (1996). *Images Redrawn* consisted of an installation-sculpture project of immense wooden sculptures of women painted a deep cobalt blue. The installation was highly multimedia, consisting of Xeroxes and serigraphs on paper and plexi glass, painted wooden sculptures positioned in diverse spaces that suggested streets, museums or other spaces. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 140, (5.2) FIGURE - 141 and (5.2) FIGURE - 142. Of this series of sculpture-installations Navjot states:

> To look back in time in search of different historical context for art, I got fascinated with primitive cultures and representation of women - not for revivalist purposes but to move and re-place the archetypal in contemporary

> context. Critical use of myth rather than its celebration alone interested me. For this body of work, I took references from Mayan, African and Indian pre-historic and indigenous cultures as well as text from women's writings, magazines and newspapers.
>
> Images Re-drawn, a cooperative project, involved a Mumbai based sculptor A. Siddiqui who was interested in working with an artist engaged with the issue of representation of female body in the context of art
>
> The idea of inviting a male artist engaged in creating stereotypical imagery of female bodies as curios, to participate in a process dealing with questions such as 'how to differentiate a female body from sexist usage or religious, and how the bodies could be reclaimed from its patriarchal construction, was to encourage dialogue and to realize how It is only through critical understanding of representation that re-presentation of women can occur, (Altaf, Images Redrawn, 1996, p. n.p).

The exhibition was installed on a floor map that evoked junctions, streets and crossroads. Filling these streets and junctions were huge wooden sculptures that brought to mind images of mother goddess sculptures from the Mexican Mayan and Olmec civilisations. Of these sculptures, eminent Asian art expert and historian, Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker states:

> These are statuesque, totemic women; their full breasts, swelling bellies, and thick thighs resonate with the life force within. […] These almost life-size female figures have an iconic presence, even when engaged in simple

> tasks. They are not goddesses on pedestals; they sit, stand, and lie directly on the ground from which they draw their power (Milford-Lutzker, 2002, p. 25) .

One of the figures sits on the floor, her legs casually spread apart, bent at the knees, in a similar position as would be used by a toddler sitting on the floor. She, as well as the other figures display their full vulvas uninhibitedly. One of the figures cups her hands together, palm up and seems to declare the title of the piece, *I Have No Fate Lines, Thank God*. However, the figure's torso, upper-arms, thighs and legs are painted red, insinuating blood; thus provoking a feeling of distress and unease in her observers. Another of the figures, also sitting on the ground, legs spread out, leans forward and seems to be examining a slate with chalk markings. She also echoes the title, *Yes I want to Read.* See: (5.2) FIGURE - 140, (5.2) FIGURE - 141 and (5.2) FIGURE - 142.

Perhaps the most poignant of these pieces is *Palini's Daughters,* – also known as *Palani's Daughters.* Here we have a huge female figure with large hips and thighs, apparently soiled in blood and dirt, sprawled on the floor seemingly writhing in pain. Next to her are six slit vulva shaped, pods. In this piece, Navjot dwells on an incident that happened at the time where a mother of six daughters killed her seventh daughter at birth, due to what she felt was her in capacity to maintain a seventh female child.

(5.2) FIGURE - 140

Navjot Altaf, (c. 1995-96) *I Have No Fate Lines, Thank God.* From the series *Images Redrawn.* (Diverse views).

[Multimedia Installation 85 x 102 x 90 cm. Painted wood and a panel consisting of Xeroxes and Serigraphs on paper]. Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf and *Artslant* magazine. Retrieved from: http://www.navjotaltaf.com/images-re-drawn.php https://www.artslant.com/par/works/show/529743-i-have-no-fate-lines-thank-god

Palini's Daughters also highlights the predicament of many rural women from villages and tribal regions of India. It points to the increasing cases of female infanticide all over the country. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 142 and (5.2) FIGURE - 143.

(5.2) FIGURE - 141

Navjot Altaf, (1995). *Yes, I want to Read,* From the *Images Redrawn* Series. [Multimedia Installation 85 x 102 x 90 cm. Painted wood]. Retrieved from (Dalmia, 2002, p. 64). Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf and Marg publications.

Nancy Adajania states that the figure of *Palani's Daughter* was based on a Mayan mother-goddess giving birth. "In Navjot's handling, Palani's archetypal power gains contemporary relevance. […] *Palani's Daughters* speak of […] discontent with a society that reduces women to machines of reproduction and further discriminates on the basis of a child's gender" (Adajania, 2016, p. 106). The piece was also accompanied by panels of rolled paper with a string to pull on attached to each roll. Tugging on the string unrolled excerpts from women's

literature that have been taken from the two volume feminist anthology *Women Writing in India, 600BC to the Twentieth Century*, by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita which has also been cited on numerous occasions in this study.

In 1996, the *India Foundation for the Arts* government program which aimed to revitalise the indigenous arts and crafts, invited Navjot Altaf, to return to Kondagaon in a collaborative project with the Adivasi artists. She worked with them encouraging them to continue making their ritual art forms while also offering them the opportunity to experiment with new forms of artistic expression. This resulted in several thriving collaborative projects and also the development of a market alongside exhibitions of Adivasi art work with coverage in the wider market.

She worked with the sculptor Jaidev Baghes, Rajkumar and Shantaben. Navjot Altaf highlights that for her these collaborative projects served to

> […] enliven the imagination through different idioms, to give myself space to reflect upon my own creative and ideological thinking. The need was also [an awareness of the] individualistic emphasis which an urban artist gives her/himself in the growing commercialization of art, (as cited in Milford-Lutzker, 2002, p. 25).

In collaboration specifically with Adivasi sculptor, Ghassuram, a project titled *Re-Vision* was elaborated between 1998 and 1999. *Re-Vision* was an installation of baked-brick structures flanked by large, massive sitting and

standing nude women holding their hands forward or holding their pregnant bellies while also intertwined by stretches of tape. Their legs start from halfway up their thighs, giving the impression that they are rising from the ground while also making them look solid and rooted down. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 144 A & B.

(5.2) FIGURE - 142

Navjot Altaf (1996). *Palani's Daughters*. From the series I*mages Redrawn*. [Painted wood and a panel consisting of serigraphs on paper and plexi glass 153 x 76 cm. Seven pieces 41 x 175 x 120 cm, 8 x 28 x 10 cm]. Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf and National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. Retrieved from: https://www.artculturefestival.in/tearing-the-heart-out-navjot-altaf-a-life-in-art-curated-by-nancy-adjani

(5.2) FIGURE - 143

Navjot Altaf (1996). *Palani's Daughters*. From the series *Images Redrawn.* [Painted wood and a panel consisting of serigraphs on paper and plexi glass 153 x 76 cm. Seven pieces 41 x 175 x 120 cm, 8 x 28 x 10 cm]. Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf and National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Retrieved from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/palanis-daughters-of-pieces/_gH_dH1q9gZB9w

However, this impression of strength, size and iconic stature is undermined by their immobility. The philosophy reflecting the contradictory issues of disempowerment, exploitation and violation of women alongside their immense strength and capacity of survival and control dominates Navjot's work throughout. See: (5.2) FIGURE - 144 A & B. As the artist states, her work

> […] retraces the familiar terrain of questioning various frameworks of social injustice and violence, transmuting my concerns to the intimate,

> often hidden private lives of women. I try to imbue my sculptures with an iconic power as they interrogate the existing power structures. I revert to the notion of "rootedness in the past" using traditional sources, motifs, materials, colours and ideas towards "not-traditional ends," hence moving, shifting and placing the archetype within a contemporary context with changed meanings, open to multiple interpretations. I view instances of identification as investigating more than just one level of experience. While dealing for some time now with the issue of representation of non-idealised female bodies in the context of art, the question of displacement is raised (as cited in Milford-Lutzker, 2002, p. 25-26).

The original grant which enabled the initial collaborative work between the artists of Bastar and Navjot has allowed for sustained collaborations over twenty years later. Workshops for children and site oriented projects amongst numerous other endeavours continue to be come up. Between 12th December 2018 and 25th January, 2019, the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai in collaboration with *The Guild* organised a retrospective titled, *The Earth's Heart, Torn Out, Navjot Altaf: A Life in Art*, curated by cultural theorist, Nancy Adajania, consisting of more than 200 pieces representing five decades of Navjot Altaf's art practice. The retrospective included drawings, prints and posters, paintings, as well as sculptures, installations and videos, alongside pieces from the collaborative work she has been engaged in since the nineties.

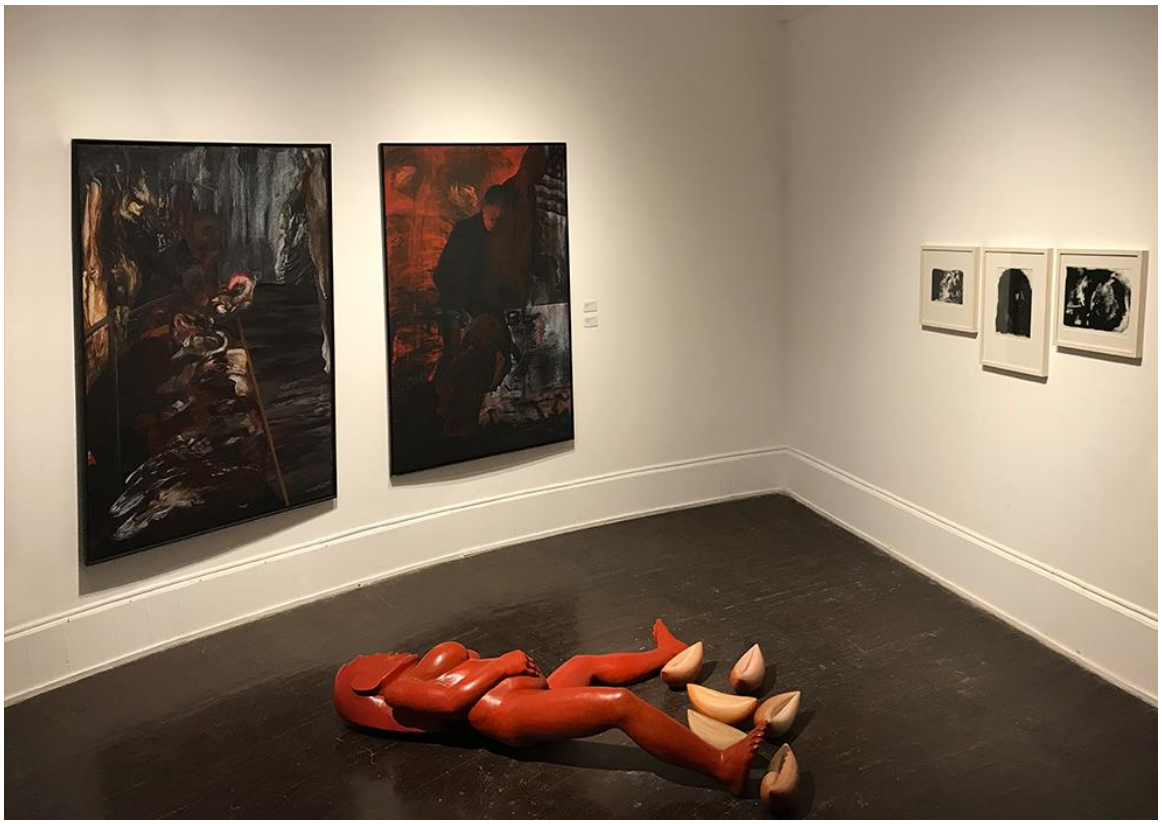
(5.2) FIGURE - 144 A & B Navjot Altaf, (1996). *Across the Crossing*. From the series *Images Redrawn.* [Painted wood 112 x 43 x 46 cm]. Courtesy of ©Navjot Altaf. (Adajania, 2016, p. 107). B – Retrieved from: http://indiaifa.org/navjot-altaf.html

The exhibition was presented within the semi-circular, multi-level National Gallery of Modern Art, which used to be the historical Sir Cowasji Jehangir Public Hall, previously the Science Society building. Gopika Nath describes the exhibition as displaying art pieces and videos "rife with an emphatic express. Of a radical artist who as a young school girl, *while running wild in the pine-covered valley of Dalhousie….felt the first stirrings to be an artist"* (Nath G. , 2019, p. para. 1). The layout of the exhibition in the circular building with spiral stairways contributed towards a heightened sense of awareness in the onlooker of Navjot's quest and "artistic yearning to break free, from the binds of authority, gender, caste, tradition and even the physical confines of the body. […] [The stairway's]

coils contributing to the excoriated angst, rising towards an imagined goal of liberation. (Nath G. , 2019, p. para. 3).

Navjot Altaf's quest, as a true transcultural artist who travels between Bastar and Mumbai while also collaborating with artists and intellectuals from Europe, Latin America and the US focuses on gaining an understanding of the political undercurrents of imbalanced societal settings while also attempting find her own place through her artistic exploration. The exhibition title is a tribute to the oppressed voices portrayed in a film created by the villagers of Chattisgarh, in east-central India, titled *Soul Breath Wind.* The film was a denunciation of unregulated mining of the lands of the villagers in connivance with indifferent state authorities. In the film a farmer called Nirupama from Chattisgarh, warns the authorities of the "disastrous outcome of displacing them from ancestral lands and of disembowelling the earth" (Nath G. , 2019, p. para. 5). He states "*Purein dharti ka kaleja nikaal diya"* (Nath G. , 2019, p. para. 5). This translates to *the whole earth's heart is torn out.*

Nancy Adajania called Navjot's work "process-oriented" (2018). As curator of the retrospective, she affirms that Navjot's art focuses on "searching, plotting and re-structuring the course of meaning through a life of artistic and civic interventions" (2018). The retrospective was the first major museum show of Navjot's work and also the first time the public National Gallery of Modern Art



(5.2) FIGURE - 145

Navjot Altaf, (2018-2019). Retrospective: *'The Earth's Heart, Torn Out' Navjot Altaf: A Life in Art 2018-19.* Curated by Nancy Adajania. (Level 1): *Tribute to a painter I admire,* (1992). *Old world and the new world being built anew,* (1992). *Lithographs*, (1982). *Palani's Daughters*, (1996). National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, Ministry of Culture Government of India, in collaboration with The Guild Art Gallery. Courtesy of Navjot Altaf. Retrieved from: http://www.navjotaltaf.com/the-earths-heart-torn-out.php

in Mumbai dedicated a show to a living artist. The questioning of violence clearly dominates Navjot's artistic narratives and enquiries as social and political appraisals. The body of work in this exhibition offers the viewer an insight into the artist's questioning of political and social apathy regarding issues of

communal riots, infanticide, genocide and corporate mining; as well as the effects of industrialization on rural populations, and climate change.

In 2006, Navjot Altaf participated in the Sydney Biennale with a nine and a half minute video titled *Lacuna in Testimony–Version 2,* making reference to the fatal Gujarat riots in 2002 during the height of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule. The right-wing Hindu Nationalist party led the government from 1998 to 2004. The riots which caused hundreds of Muslim victims was precipitated by events following the burning of a bus in the border town of Godhra. The video focuses specifically on the city of Ahmedabad were displaced Muslims were housed in transit camps. However, the video uses the Gujarat riots to build a broader historical comparison of mass murderous events in India and elsewhere around the world. It super imposes and overlays images from the 1947 partition footage, the Sikh riots in Delhi as well as the 1993 Mumbai disturbances with Western twentieth century historical cycles and traumatic historical events. As such, the video focuses on European fascism, the Holocaust, Hiroshima as well as the events of 9/11. An earlier installation piece created in 2001 and titled *Between Memory and History* also addresses the issues above. Peter Osborn states of *Lacuna in Testimony,*

> This is a heavily symbolic and allegorical piece, which relies upon certain very well-known historical imagery for an analogical construction of historical meaning. The work is addressed to a Western gaze, within whose pre-established terms a claim is made for the genocidal character of the

> events in Gujarat. Analogy fills the evidential gap, the 'lacuna in testimony (Osborne, 2013, p. 199).

In an interview with her art historian daughter, Sasha Altaf, Navjot reminiscences about the influence that writers such as Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker, Lucy Lippard, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Mieke Bal, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger and Julia Kristeva, amongst others, had on shaping her narrative. The issues that these writers raised, ranging from "sexual difference, the Holocaust, poetic fiction and feminism, the struggle against imperialist control and internal disintegration in search for identity" (Altaf & Altaf, 2017, p. 48), were significant in shaping Navjot's creative process and oeuvre, directly and indirectly. Delving into the writings of these authors provided her with an understanding of gender analysis and power structures from an art historical, artistic production, and discourse perspective. Navjot elaborates,

> I was stimulated by Helene Cixous' idea that "within each of us lies a multitude of others" and Griselda Pollock's concept of rewriting histories with a new language of difference. At that point I was thinking – by drawing from feminist studies, how would I reflect on Adivasi history and subjectivity? And I was looking at examples of inclusiveness that would respect difference and diversity in the context of contemporary politics and art history (Altaf & Altaf, 2017, p. 48).

The discussions with Sasha Navjot laid the theoretical foundation for pieces such as *Between Memory and History* (2000-2001), *Lacuna in Testimony* (2003), and *Trail of Impunity* (2012). *Trail of Impunity* is a video recording of a conversation between Teesta Setalved and Rupa Mody, a refugee camp, and witness survivor of the Gujarat riots who lost her only son. The piece is essentially a conversation between the artist, an activist and a survivor that forms the basis of a critique of instigated violence. In her long career spanning over fifty years, Navjot Altaf has used her experimentations with diverse media and forms of artistic creation to express a journey that celebrates diversity, connections and interactions while also grieving losses through tough statements regarding socio-economic and political trends. She holds a firm belief and hope in the power of art to raise awareness and influence change, citing Ernst Fischer's *The Necessity of Art* as one of her main sources of inspirations from the beginning. In referring to Fischer's statements, an example would be:

> True as it is that the essential function of art for a class destined to change the world is not that of making magic but of enlightening and stimulation action, it is equally true that a magical residue in art cannot be entirely eliminated, […] Art is necessary in order that man should be able to recognise and change the world. But art is also necessary by virtue of the magic inherent in it (Fischer, 2010, p. 23).

Navjot Altaf states of Fischer's writing, "that synthesis of action and magic inspired me a great deal and will shape my thought processes in the years to come" (Altaf & Balasubramaniam, 2017, p. 43).

PART 6 EMPOWERMENT AND THE ARTIST AS SOCIAL ACTIVIST

To Question or not to Question: That is the Question.

> There are more academics in existence than ever before but most prefer not to confront authority even if it debars the path of free thinking. Is this because they wish to pursue knowledge undisturbed or because they are ready to discard knowledge, should authority require them to do so, [...]. It is not that we are bereft of people who can think autonomously and ask relevant questions. But frequently where there should be voices, there is silence. Are we all being co-opted too easily by the comforts of conforming?

Romila Thapar
(Third Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture, 26th October, 2014, India International Centre, New Delhi).[141]

6.1- ACTIVISM, ART AND CENSORSHIP

In the above lecture, Romila Thapar, distinguished historian, laments what she considers to be a worrying lack of will or apathy on the part of today´s scholars, intellectuals and other academics or relevant members of society, to

[141] Organized by: The Book Review Literary Trust. (Thapar, 2014)

protest and speak out against the atrocities and mechanisms of indoctrination that are effectively being installed and propagated unchecked in Indian society.[142] This in turn is leading to the dangerous erosion of intellectual, cultural and religious heritage of the country. Thapar also rues at the lack of wholehearted, clearly articulated dissent in the evidence of significant instances of state authorized crimes against human and civil rights. Professor Thapar draws a parallel with the philosophers of ancient India, who were branded as non-believers due to their dissent against Brahminical autocracy and the current day labelling as Marxists or communists of all those who raise their voice to challenge the actions of fundamentalist Hindutva.

In her lecture, Romila Thapar reiterates the direly urgent need to contest the all too common refutation of civil rights, state endorsed hate campaigns and genocide. She highlights cases such as the destruction and prohibition of books, the changing of school syllabuses under religious and political pretexts or state interventions, which she asserts have drawn slow and reticent reactions from relevant academics and or scholars. "Why do such actions provoke so little reaction […]?" (Thapar, 2014). Professor Thapar states that the cause of such restraint, it would seem, might be due to the case of "fear of the instigators – who

[142] See: (Vincent, 2014), the Hindu, October 27, 2014. http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/academics-must-question-more-romila/article6535612.ece

are persons with the backing of political authority" (Thapar, 2014). However, as she declares, it is of imminent urgency that we maintain the discourse and "traditions of rational thought in our intellectual heritage" (Thapar, 2014). In her lecture, Professor Thapar provides one with a clear picture that wakes us up to the fact that there is an urgent need to ask questions about the society that one is striving to create and to what end; that there is the need to continuously appraise the choices of authority that are made whether they be religious, political or governmental. One must draw on historical memory and informed analysis to dispute unjust ideas and practices and to contest, using rational, scientific debate and evidence, polities that come to play in issues of human rights, gender equality and the good functioning of society; so as to successfully bring about the change that would make for an improved society.

In reminding us of the person of Nikhil Chakravartty, who has been described as "A towering journalist, […]", Nikhilda′s life […] was a celebration of humanity and the indomitable human spirit" (Rai, 2013, p. para.10), Professor Thapar also reminds the public that Nikhil Chakravartty as well as other scholars of the time "strongly opposed forms of censorship and the attempt to silence alternate voices" (Thapar, 2014).

However, it would appear that the past twenty five years have witnessed a marked contraction in the area of dissension in India. It can be suggested as being quite obvious that the questioning of conventional structures of polity and the demand for responsible action in situations involving subversion of justice and

human rights necessarily must be an ongoing process, if any semblance of ongoing balance and fulfilment of basic rights is to be achieved in societies such as those in India. "¿Dime cómo protestas y te diré en qué país vives?" (Guerrero, 2015), to borrow Carlos Guerrero´s line in referring to the moral message in eminent Spanish historian Rafael Cruz Martinez's recently published book, *Protestas En España 1900-2013*[143]. In her lecture, Romila Thapar alludes to the numerous and common instances and usage of "absurd fantasies about specific religions" as a means of flaming malevolent propaganda leading to the eruption and polarization of religious fundamentalism and violence. It would appear that over the last twenty five years there has been a "narrowing of liberal space", (Thapar, 2014).

Nancy Adajani, cultural theorist, art critic and curator states that the decade of liberalization in India in the 1990s, which witnessed the opening of society, trade and the economy up to the global market, after fifty years of economic protectionism and political incongruence, also coincided with a period of self-appraisal and reckoning amongst artists (Adajani, 2004). Access to information regarding the type of artistic practice that was taking place in other parts of the world, including other post-colonial societies, provoked artists and other sectors of the Indian art world to scrutinise their own artistic development and practice more exhaustively than in previous times. In their assessment, many of the

[143] (Cruz, 2015) Protestar En España 1900-2013, Alianza Editorial, Madrid

younger artists seem to have experienced the sense that their nationalist attitudes and aspirations to modernism had to a certain extent restricted their artistic and creative practice.

Meanwhile, as Nancy Adajani highlights, artists also found themselves in the midst of a highly insidious and severe crisis in the guise of development. Spurring mind-sets and sentiments similar to those that were seen to be evident from early post-colonial era, globalization was provoking a backlash of fundamentalism amongst the majoritarian militant Hindu movement, Hindutva, (Adajani, 2004); which reacted to the opening of society and markets as to a direct threat to the Hindu culture. Globalization was perceived as a danger to the objective of converting India into an abiding Hindu nation, as opposed to nurturing the richness and diversity of the multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual reality that is perhaps India´s most distinctive attribute.

This was demonstrated in the form of unprecedented demands for censorship, threats and violent attacks upon artistic freedom and public statements or discourse pronounced outside the premise of Hindu conservatives and right-wing activists. Adajani states that the post-colonial artistic practice in India had left artists largely ill prepared to address or challenge this type of crisis and as a result "quietism, rather than activism, has been the leitmotif of Indian art" (Adajani, 2004, p. para. 4). Adajani also stresses that artists are currently in the perilous position of finding themselves totally overwhelmed in the face of the highly sophisticated strategies and technologically sound weapons of "global

communication and urban warfare" (Adajani, 2004, p. para. 4), that the Hindu Right have in their power. "The greatest challenge for Indian artists today is to counter the Hindu Right's claim over the symbolic reality of India, a claim that runs counter to the Nehruvian national imaginary, which was based on secular and broadly progressive ideals" (Adajani, 2004, p. para. 4).

The Hindutva stronghold is being stealthily augmented through the application of a sophisticated, well thought out plan of indoctrination, using the services of an extensive network of schools, political, religious, voluntary and other organizations at grassroots levels; which collaborate in the distribution of Hindutva propaganda in the form of handouts, booklets, television serials, audio and video cassettes as well as the internet through chats, Hindu nationalist web sites and similar sources (Adajani, 2004). Hence, protest and activist artists and intellectuals face the formidable and daunting challenge of having to overcome the draconian, albeit sophisticated tools of extremist conditioning by finding the appropriate imagery and language with which to connect with the populace and disseminate their non-sectarian message, as well as the necessary technology and organization with which to build a discernible network of followers and backing with which to counter or reverse the effects of Hindutva extremism.

As stated, one of the major hurdles facing artists in all fields, including writers, journalists and other intellectuals in India is the increasingly belligerent and militant use of censorship and violence to quieten and eradicate every type of expression that is perceived as criticism or dissent. To quote historian and

broadcaster Zareer Masani, "It sounds like an oxymoron: the world's "largest democracy" routinely curtails freedom of expression. But it's the truth" (Masani, 2015, p. para.1). Adhikari asserts that a lot of what can be perceived as "violent moral policing" in India has gathered momentum in the last twenty years and focuses on the "apparent need for such groups to keep women in their place". (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1422). According to reports by the National Crime reports Bureau, (as cited in Adhikari, 2012), by 2010 the rate of crimes committed against women overtook the rate of population growth. The actual figures had not yet been released at the time of writing this paper; however there has been no perceivable change in the trend so far.

Masani draws attention to the government prohibition of the 2015 BBC documentary by Leslee Udwin, *India's daughter,* which offers graphic details, not only of the actual rape and its consequences of the 23 year old physiotherapist /medical student, Jyoti Singh – cited earlier in this study –, but also to the sweeping, customary perverse and entrenched attitudes towards women, even amongst many of the educated citizens of India occupying important positions of authority in government and other public institutions. A survey carried out in 1996 by the *Sakshi*[144] charity organization, in which 109 judges were interviewed,

[144] See: http://www.sakshingo.org Centre for Information, Education & Communication.

clearly highlights the blood curdling reality of implicit, ingrained attitudes towards women amongst those in power.

> 48 percent believed that there were certain occasions when it was justifiable for a husband to slap his wife;
>
> 74 percent believed that the preservation of the family should be the woman's primary concern, even if she faced violence;
>
> 50 percent believed that child sexual abuse was not common;
>
> 68 percent believed that 'provocative' clothes were an invitation to sexual assault;
>
> 55 per cent believed that the moral character of a woman was relevant in cases of sexual abuse (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1475-1485) .

Adhikari also cites a United Nations Report titled *Women In India* (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1467), which outlines persisting and prevailing attitudes amongst both men and women that encourage domestic violence; such as the necessity to establish and maintain authority over women by their menfolk, or the need to "discipline them and to punish them for derelictions of duty" (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1467). Some of the acts that are deemed as justifying violent physical punishment range from "House not well managed, […] Economic constraints, […] Children not well cared for, […] Meals not well prepared, and Meals not ready on time" (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1467).

India's daughter graphically highlights the shockingly endemic incidence of violence against women in India, the widespread and persisting discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes towards girls and women amongst both the common people as well as those in authority; while also highlighting the fact of the extensive censorship laws of India. The ban on the documentary to be shown in India was accompanied also by a demand for it to be officially outlawed from viewing worldwide, (Masani, 2015).

Masani points out that India's constitution declares it to be "a secular republic with freedom of expression as a fundamental right" (Masani, 2015, p. para.2); while in the same breath forbidding any form of expression that "might offend religious sensitivities" (Masani, 2015, p. para.2). The outcome of this is that any work of art, performance, film or piece of writing that challenges established norms of sexual and religious boundaries or conventional culture is prone to provoke multiple and dangerous reactions of violence including calls for the destruction of the artwork; at times going so far as to demand severe punishment or the death of the artist, filmmaker or writer etc. concerned. Masani asserts that "every day it gets more dangerous, as attempts grow to draw together the diverse strands and sects of traditional Hinduism into an organised religion, with a centralised hierarchy of priests and a unified worldwide congregation" (Masani, 2015, p. para.2).

According to Masani, censorship laws were initially established in India in 1927; after the publication of a book alluding to the supposed sexual promiscuity

of the prophet Mohamed caused a storm of riots and revolt amongst the Muslim population in the Punjab. Faced with a severe situation of Hindu - Muslim strife, the British government, alongside Indian politicians legislated what Masani terms the "bedrock of Indian censorship – Section 295 (A) of the Indian Penal Code" (Masani, 2015, p. para.3). The law determines that all offences towards religious sentiments or beliefs, "with deliberate or malicious intention" (as cited in Masani, 2015, para. 3), are punishable with up to 3 years imprisonment. This is a law that has been applied liberally over the last 80 years to successfully outlaw and pull down theatre performances, art exhibitions as well as expropriate books and coerce writers and publishers into recalling their works, (Masani, 2015, p. para.3).

One of the initial instances of the application of censorship laws in India occurred in the 1930s at a time when Katherine Mayo, – examined earlier in this study, – the American social historian and researcher, declared that India was not ready for independence. As already examined previously, Mayo substantiated her assertion by documenting cases of the exploitation of women through child marriage, young pregnancies and rape related sexual injures, evidence that she put together from interviews with young girls in hospitals, as well as meetings with far ranging segments of the society from barristers, Mahatma Gandhi and other political figureheads as well as the poorest Dalits, amongst others. As examined previously, *Mother India*, first published in 1927, (Sinha M. , 2006)*;* (Frink, 2006)*;* (Dep, 2013), provoked a storm of reaction worldwide. It generated new interpretations, debates and discourse on the colonial, political and social; as well

as issues of women´s rights, (Sinha M. , 2006). A later publication by Mayo in 1935, titled *The Face of Mother India*, was banned in India for what was considered to be its "overtly anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim bias", (Sinha, 2008, p. para.5).

Admittedly according to diverse sources, Mayo was well known to have been unquestionably pro-imperialist, bigoted and xenophobic in her outlook. Her openly derogatory and racist views that non-whites were lacking in self-control and had sexually aggressive traits, amongst others; not only undermined her research which notwithstanding was unarguably quite accurate in some of its portrayals, but also exposed Mayo to much criticism and loss of following, even amongst her own peers who at some point might have strived to engage with her on the colonial issue as well as the situation of women and the feminist agenda.

> Even the British feminist Eleanor Rathbone, who was an early supporter of *Mother India*, eventually parted company with Mayo because of the latter's crusade to absolve the colonial government of any responsibility for the situation in India (Sinha, 2008, p. para.4).

> *Mother India*, a polemical attack against Indian self-rule […] has acquired something of a legendary status among students of colonial India and, in particular, of Indian women. When *mother India* was published […] it was celebrated and reviled by diehard imperialists and outraged nationalists (Sinha, 1998/2000, p. 1).

Sinha also states of her as having been "a U.S. citizen with impeccable right-wing credentials" (Sinha M. , 2006, p. x). Sinha has described her writing as containing "anti-labour, anti-Catholic, and pro-imperialist bias" (Sinha, 2008, p. para.4); while Paul Teed states of the book, "*Mother India*, an explicitly pro-imperialist book by conservative Pennsylvania journalist […] Fawning in its support of British rule, and extravagantly critical of India's social practices" (Teed, 2003, p. 35).

Irrespective of what Mayo may have represented in her political outlook, both *Mother India* and *The Face of Mother India* could be credibly compared to Leslee Udwin's outlawed documentary, *India's daughter*. Masani states that although there was a splattering of opposition from some liberals and feminists, the censorship and banning of Mayo's book, demonstrated the farce around the nationalist interpretation of freedom of expression.

> Nationalists were unanimous in their condemnation. Mahatma Gandhi famously likened her to a drain inspector – she had come to India in search of filth and dredged up whatever sewage she could find – and since then, national pride and religious sentiment have always trumped freedom of expression in defining the limits of state consent (Masani, 2015, p. para.5).

Other relatively unknown cases of outlawing what is deemed as "anti-Indian" by the government are to be found in, for example, Aubrey Menon´s

version of the *Ramayana,* which is a retelling of the epic where Rama is portrayed in a singularly unflattering light due to his behaviour with Sita, and she is interpreted as surrendering to the charms of "the very suave and scholarly Sri Lankan king Ravana (usually depicted as a demon and burnt in an effigy by Hindus at the festival of Dussehra every year)" (Masani, 2015, p. para.6). Masani asserts that although the government of the time "was Jawaharlal Nehru's secular, socialist regime;" Nehru did not feel in a position that was politically strong enough to challenge "Hindu anger" and was known to have "shamefacedly" apologised to Menon for approving a ban that went against his own personal opinion, but that "would have been politically too damaging" (Masani, 2015, p. para.7).

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Nehru´s daughter, went so far as to evict the BBC from India on August 29, 1970; closing the New Delhi offices and terminating local staff contracts, after the broadcasting in the UK of *Calcutta,* and a seven part series, *L'Indie Fantome* by Louis Malle. The documentaries depicted the poverty, corruption and slums, to be found around the country, (Pinkerton, 2008); and were hence deemed as "anti-Indian" (Masani, 2015, p. para.7). Masani points out that although Section 295 (A) is supposed to have been elaborated in order to conserve religious sensitivities, it has often been applied for other protectionist strategies and "where Section 295 cannot be stretched to fit the offence, the Indian Penal Code obligingly offers the even wider remit of Section 153 (A)" (Masani, 2015, p. para.8).

One of the most notorious cases of censorship in India is of course the banning of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, in October 1988. Gautam Adhikari states that on the publication of the *Satanic Verses*, a review in an Indian newspaper focused on passages from the book that the reviewer deemed as open to distortion by hard lined Muslims. Acting exactly on that cue, various leaders of the Muslim community organised mass demonstrations with the support of the Janata Party, demanding that the book be banned by the government. Rajiv Gandhi's administration took but a few days to buckle under the demands, (Adhikari, 2012).

According to Rushdie himself, before its prohibition, "The book had not been examined by any properly authorized body, nor had there been any semblance of judicial process" (Rushdie, 2012, p. para.6). Shortly after its publication, on February 14 1989, the moribund Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa against Rushdie which still stands today; "his fatwa was a case of sentence first and trial later" (The Guardian, 2012). Notwithstanding, *The Satanic Verses* got short listed for the 1988 *Booker Prize* and went on to win the Whitbread Novel Award, (The Man Booker Prizes, 2015). Previous to this, in 1981, Rushdie had won the Booker Prize for *Midnight Children*, amongst several other prizes and awards. *Midnight Children* went on to be classified as the "Booker of Bookers" in that it was judged as being "the best novel to have won the Booker Prize for Fiction in the award's 25 year history" (The Man Booker Prizes, 2015).

I draw attention to the case of the censorship against Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in order to exemplify the outright lack of even the bear minimum or semblance of objectivity, reasoning or criteria in the decisions that bring about such blatant smothering and elimination of freedom of expression in India. In an open letter that Salman Rushdie wrote to the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, (Rushdie, 1988), Rushdie states that the banning of his book was imposed by the finance minister; this of course makes one question what is the relationship between the ministry of finance and the reading material available to the Indian public and why would the finance ministry be taking a decision that is so obviously outside its competency. Even more revealing is the fact that at the bottom of the censorship notification document, the ministry went on to state that "the ban did not detract from the literary and artistic merit" (Rushdie, 1988, p. para.2) of the book.

What is even more acutely alarming however is the fact that, as stated by Rushdie, the decision to ban the book was taken after a couple of Muslim members of Parliament attacked the book and author while declaring that "they had no need actually to read it" (Rushdie, 1988, p. para.3). Rushdie states in his letter that the ban was vehemently opposed by the Indian press at the time which described it in terms of "a Philistine decision" (*The Hindu*) or "thought control" (*Indian Express*)" (as cited in Rushdie, 1988). Gautam Adhikari states that the banning of *The Satanic Verses* in India marked the start of the use of "radical Muslim ideologues across the world" (Adhikari, 2012, p. Chap. 5).

According to Geoffrey Robertson QC, soon after the banning of *The Satanic Verses* in India, a private prosecutor attempted to summon Rushdie to the Old Bailey in the UK, in order to attend the trial pending on him for blasphemous libel. The magistrate turned down the summons and the case ended up in the High Court where "13 Muslim Barristers attempted to get the book banned" (The Guardian, 2012, p. para.3). Unlike in India however, the fortuitous result of this in the United Kingdom was that the crime of blasphemy was eliminated altogether from the English legal system, (The Guardian, 2012).

Perhaps one of the saddest cases of Indian intolerance and fanaticism is to be found in the treatment that India has inflicted onto one who was unarguably one of her greatest modernist painters, Maqbool Fida Husain. Husain was forced to live out the last days of his life in exile in Dubai, due to the senseless death threats and persecution to which he was mercilessly subjected well into his old age. Husain was one of the founding members of India's artists' collective, *The Progressive Artists Group*, which according to distinguished historian Partha Mitter, included those who "were some of the main architects of Indian modernism" (Mitter, 2007, p. 227). Formed on the eve of Independence in 1947, facing tremendous institutional opposition and resistance, the group disputed the existing conservative Indian art system and strived to break away from academic realism, reinventing modernism based on traditional Indian painting while also embracing new global developments in art, (Dalmia, 2001).

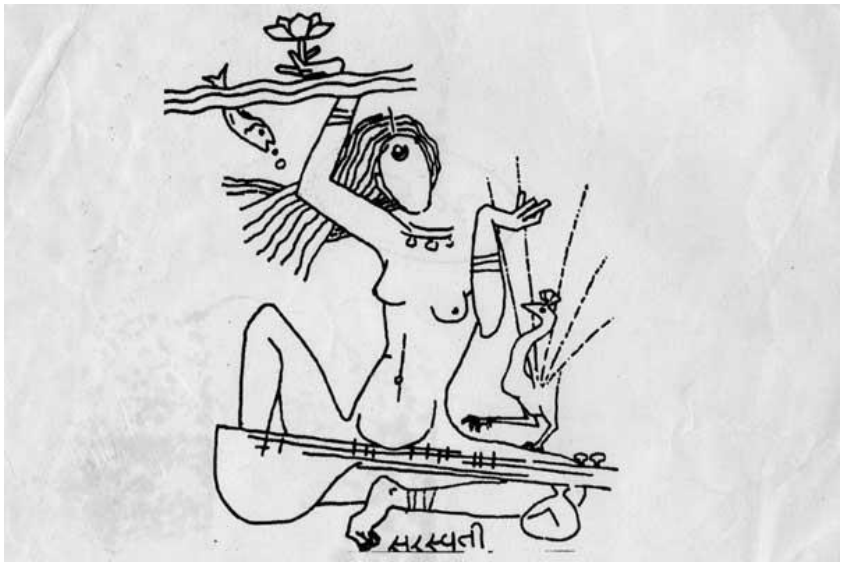
The beginning of the persecution of Husain and his art would appear to have started in 1996, after the art critic Dyaneshwar Nadkarani, published an illustrated book of his works. As stated by Adhikari, "A drawing in the book started a tsunami of intolerance, thanks to which Husain eventually had to escape the country and take refuge in a Gulf nation" (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1245). Despite the fact that Husain had been portraying nude goddesses and mythological beings for several years, and that classical or traditional Indian art form is no stranger to nudity,– as can be clearly demonstrated from a visit to the caves of *Ajanta* and *Ellora* in Maharashtra or *Khajuraho* in Madhya Pradesh; – the branding in a Hindu nationalist magazine of a twenty year old nude drawing of the Hindu goddess Saraswati as "a blasphemous act by a Muslim artist" (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1245), unbelievable as it may seem, was enough to set off a wave of fundamentalism and intolerance from which Husain was only to be liberated by death.[145]

The hatred and vitriol to which the artist was subjected bears more likeness to fiction than reality. Husain became the target of hate campaigns fanned and

[145] See: https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/story/19961031-m-f-husain-20-year-old-painting-of-nude-deity-raises-questions-about-artistic-freedom-833984-1996-10-31

https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/a-gesture-denied-in-life-pm-mourns-loss-hawks-pay-qualified-tribute/cid/380663

fired by extremist militant Hindu organizations like *Bajrang Dal* and *Hindu Vishva Parishad*. His person as well as his art work came under siege, his drawings and paintings were burnt, and he became the victim of a national hate campaign that spread like wild fire. "Confused and distraught, Husain apologised to those whom he might have inadvertently hurt" (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1255).



(6.1) FIGURE - 146

M. F. Husain (1976). *Saraswati*. [Ink drawing]. Courtesy of the artist. Retrieved from: https://www.quackreview.com/10-controversial-paintings-of-m-f-husain/

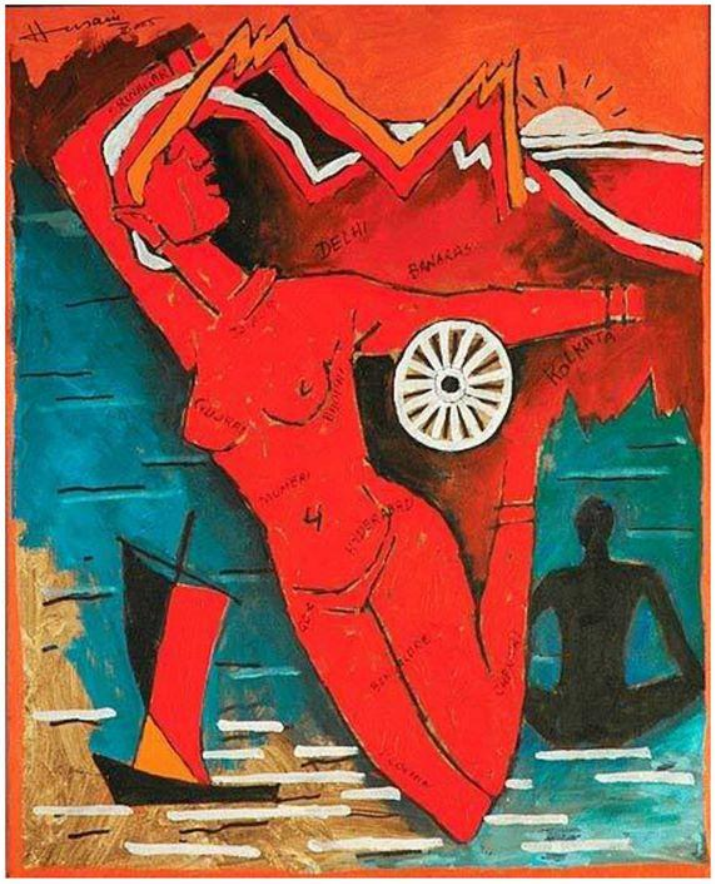
From then onwards, controversy and disturbance were to follow Husain and his art practice indefinitely; none of the galleries that dared to continue displaying his work were safe. Eventually, faced with persistent, unabating animosity and threats, with numerous legal cases filed under censorship laws and acts for hurting of religious sentiment pending against him; and with the continuous threat and

danger to his life and wellbeing, Husain was forced to leave India to settle in the United Arab Emirates, (Adhikari, 2012). To quote Gautam Adhikari´s sentiments,

> When an artist of the calibre of Husain renounces his citizenship of India, some of us proud Indians are entitled to weep because we too can be sensitive. But we would fight to defend the right to freedom of expression of those who mock our tears (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1341-1350).

Geeta Kapur asserts that,

> The unfolding 'case of Husain' in the past few years proves that whatever was sanctioned in progressive politics of the post-Independence phase – by a centrist State, the national bourgeoisie, a secular people – has come to be desanctioned by the Hindu right wing. Precipitated by the charge that Husain is a Muslim artist playing with Hindu myths and religion, the controversy is about the right of representation through images and whether this right is bound by community (inevitably embedded in religion). It brings up the necessary role of the Muslim artist/ intellectual in defining the nature of Indian secular culture. It raises questions about the status of mythology in contemporary life, of the relation between cultural symbols and secular politics. It also brings up the fate of modern art in the developing orthodoxies (Turner & Kapur, 2001, pp. 48,49).



(6.1) FIGURE - 147

M. F. Husain, (2006). *Bharat Mata.* Courtesy of the artist. Retrieved from: https://www.quackreview.com/10-controversial-paintings-of-m-f-husain/

Bharat Mata was another highly controversial painting although Husain always claimed that he did not give this piece the title by which it is known.

See also: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/jun/15/mf-husain-obituary

The instances of censorship and persecution of the authors of any form of creative expression seen to overstep established boundaries are by no means limited to these examples. As Adhikari asserts, "Artists, writers, dramatists and film-makers have become easy targets of Hindu and Muslim extremists in India" (Adhikari, 2012, pp. chap. 6, location 1286). There have been innumerable examples even involving art students. One example is the case of S. Chandramohan, art student of *Maharaja Sayajirao University* of Baroda in Gujarat, whose final year, private student examination show, – which was closed

to the public – was stormed by police who were accompanied by lawyer Niraj Jain, and members of the student wing, *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (VHP), of the ultra–conservative Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP)*, – the state government of Gujarat.

Chandramohan was physically assaulted and arrested for what was termed as "obscene" work while the examination process was brought to a stop. (Nath D. , 2007). The city police Commissioner, P.C. Thakur accused him of "deliberately offending religious sentiments" (Sengupta S. , 2007, p. para. 5). Chandramohan spent five nights in prison facing charges of "inciting religious enmity and hurting religious sensibility" (Nath D. , 2007, p. para. 2). At the time of writing this paper, a date for his trial had still not been set and Chandramohan faced the possibility of having to spend several years in prison, if convicted. On his release, he was forced to go into hiding.

Adding to this atrocity is the fact that Manoj Soni, the university vice chancellor at the time, rather than reproaching the behaviour of the police and mob, actually expected the acting dean of the faculty of fine arts, Shivaji Panikkar, to close down the exhibition and "issue an apology for offending public opinion" (Nath D. , 2007, p. para. 2); (Achar & Panikkar, 2012); (Sengupta S. , 2007). Shivaji K. Panikkar, backed by both fellow staff and students rejected the order, organizing instead a peaceful protest by elaborating an exhibition of reproductions of images of Hindu deities in the nude, retrieved from archives of

the department of art history. The purpose of this being to reiterate the obvious, that Indian classical and ancient art abounds with explicit erotic deities and forms.

According to art historian Parul Dave Mukherji, who was visiting the university campus as an examiner on that fateful 9th of May 2007, (as cited in Sengupta, S., 2007); "They want to control how we interpret our past". Panikkar who was an alumnus of the university was suspended by the university authorities after 27 years of service; the protest exhibition was dismounted and the department temporarily closed down (Nath D. , 2007); (Sengupta S. , 2007); (Achar & Panikkar, 2012).

Adding insult to injury, the university vice chancellor Manoj Soni further defended his stance by branding the art work as "highly deplorable"; while simultaneously, the lawyer who provoked the onslaught in the first place is said to have declared in a telephone interview, that he was proud of his campaign, describing the work as "an attack on Indian culture, I cannot tolerate any insult to our culture and to our god and goddesses" (Sengupta S. , 2007, p. para. 11).

One is nonplussed to understand how the present day radical champions of Hindu puritanism reconcile their ideologies with centuries' old Hindu temples that clearly bear witness to an ancient religious tradition based at least partly on a philosophy of wellbeing through the pursuit of pleasure. This is amply illustrated in the elaborate sculptures portraying highly graphic scenes of nudity and sexual activity; to be found in temples such as those of *Khajuraho* in Madhya Pradesh, not to mention the renowned ancient "textbook of erotic love", the *Kamasutra*;

(Vatsyayana, Doniger, & Kakar, 2003), compiled by Sage Vatsyayana in Northern India around the third century A.D.

Censorship on religious grounds would appear to be further on the rise after the landslide election victory of Narendra Modi's *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), translated literally as The Indian People's Party; held in April and May, 2014 and again in 2019 with an even further increase in its sizable majority. Although the BJP claim to be a secular organization, non-biased and respectful of the religious and cultural diversity in India, their election rhetoric seems to betray clear anti-Muslim and Hindu extremist bias. As stated by Zareer Masani, "the ideas that they want to promote are every bit as worrying as their desire to ban alternate views" (Masani, 2015, p. para. 11).

Just as Romila Thapar underscored in her speech for the Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture, in October, 2014, Masani highlights the unchecked, appalling campaign to modify and rewrite school textbooks, from an extreme Hindu perspective, where the last eight centuries of British and Muslim rule in India are categorized as periods of injustice and autocracy, in which the authentic Hindu civilization of India was destroyed through forced religious conversions. "But their born-again Hinduism, now called Hindutva, is very different from the tolerant polytheism of the past, which welcomed virtually any form of worship including Buddhism and Christianity" (Masani, 2015, p. para. 12). Professor Thapar, (as cited in Masani, 2015, para. 13) sees "this new Hindutva as a kind of syndicated Hinduism. […] It's borrowing from Western

models to create an organised, ecclesiastically run religion which might be used politically in a fascistic way to deny India's traditional plurality".

I would like to draw attention to the law suit brought against distinguished scholar and Indologist, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, and her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History;* first published in 2009 by Penguin Books; and the ensuing worldwide response from both academics and the media. In the relevant academic circles, Doniger is widely acknowledged as being an undisputed authority on Hinduism. She has published numerous books and articles, and has written and translated just as many religious scripts from Sanskrit to English with scholarly commentaries. Her academic credentials and experience are unequalled and she has received diverse awards and prizes in recognition of the depth and quality of her expertise and writing.[146]

Before the lawsuit and subsequent banning of the book in India, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* had actually been in circulation right from the beginning of its publication by Penguin India in 2010. To quote Doniger herself,

> [..] in February of this year, after a long career of relative obscurity in the ivory tower, I suddenly became notorious. In 2010, Penguin India had published a book of mine, The Hindus: An Alternative History, which won two awards in India; in 2012, the Ramnath Goenka Award, and in 2013, the

[146] See: https://divinity.uchicago.edu/wendy-doniger

> Colonel James Tod Award. But within months of its publication in India, a then-eighty-one-year-old retired headmaster named Dina Nath Batra, a proud member of the far-right organization *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), had brought the first of a series of civil and criminal actions against the book, arguing that it violated Article 295a of the Indian Penal Code, which forbids "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class" of citizens (Doniger, 2014, p. para. 1).

Penguin India fought against the lawsuit for four years before finally toppling, agreeing to stop publication and to destroy all remaining copies of the book. A brief viewing of the academic and political background of the likes of Dina Nath Batra, the self-appointed guardians of Hindutva is required, before also looking at the reactions of scholars and intellectuals in India and around the world. "Dinath Batra considers himself a campaigner with a cause" (Buncombe, 2014, p. para. 1). As asserted by Buncombe, the retired school head teacher has taken it upon himself to purify what he sees as contaminants damaging to Hinduism or India. In order to follow through with his crusade he uses the Indian legal system and particularly (as cited in Buncombe, 2014, para. 8), the previously mentioned infamous section 295a of the Indian Penal Code. Act 295 (A) legally criminalizes "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings" (Doniger, 2014, p. para. 1); (Masani, 2015, p. para. 3).

Batra has successfully stopped the publication or outlawed the distribution in India of numerous books apart from Doniger's; such as publications by Orient BlackSwan, amongst which is the book, *"Communalism and Sexual Violence: Ahmedabad Since 1969*, by Indian academic and Rhodes scholar Megha Kumar" (Buncombe, 2014, p. para. 12). Kumar´s book, which was part of her Oxford DPhil thesis – and had been submitted to rigorous examination and review prior publication – examines the occurrence of sexual violence in Gujarat during diverse communal clashes that took place in the city; spanning the three major episodes of violence against Muslim women in 1969, 1985 and 2002 (Ghoshal, 2014, p. para. 8); (Bal, 2014). Megha Kumar was informed by Orient BlackSwan "that the book would now be set aside for comprehensive reassessment" (Bal, 2014, p. para. 1).

Another outlawed Orient BlackSwan publication is to be found in historian, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's book, *From Plassey to Partition: a History of Modern India*; which was prevented from release in India, described as being "defamatory to the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organisation inextricably linked to India's ruling *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP)" (Buncombe, 2014, p. para. 7). Both Batra and India´s current prime minister, Narendra Modi used to be members of the RSS.[147]

[147] See: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-29593336

Dinath's self-appointed cleansing and rewriting of Indian history crusade first made headlines when he successfully got the Delhi High court to order the withdrawal – after 24 years – from the Delhi University history syllabus of the highly compelling essay *"Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on translation"*; written by eminent poet and scholar, A. K. Ramanujan, for a conference held at the University of Pittsburgh in 1987, (Biswas, 2011). According to Ramanujan's essay, irrespective of the fact that Valmiki's poetic telling of the *Ramayana* in Sanskrit is the most influential and popular version amongst Hindu Indians, there are in fact numerous and distinct versions of the epic in over 20 languages including Chinese, Thai and Tibetan.

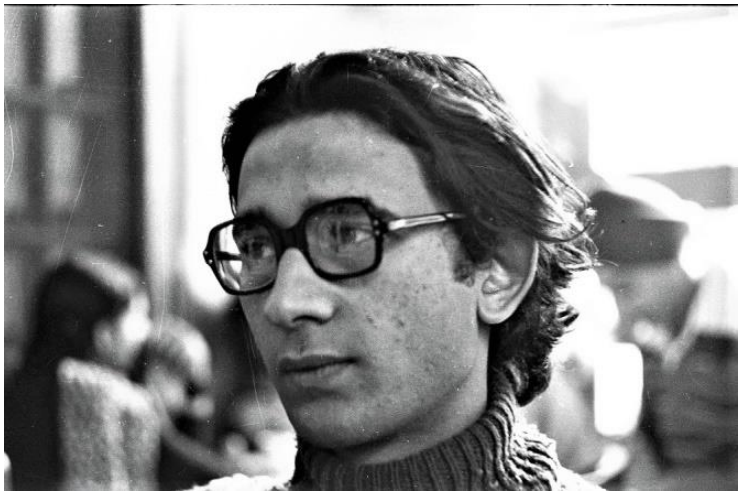
For more than 30 years now Indians have been fed a soap opera version of the epic, since the initial televised airing of the series mentioned earlier in this study, which literally brought the country to a halt every Sunday morning. Most young children in Hindu families are introduced to fairy-tale, comic and storybook accounts of the epic, at a very young age. These versions, according to journalist Sugata Srinivasaraju, (as cited in Biswas, 2011, p.8), "iconises [sic] Ram". Meanwhile, Hindu extremist groups are adamant that the narration of the Ramayana "retain the structure and simplicity of a bedtime story so that you fall asleep in consent and total belief as you listen to it" (as cited in Biswas, 2011, p.8).

It is distressingly easy to come up with further examples of state censorship and attacks on freedom of speech, artistic expression as well as the rewriting of

history and educational syllabuses by clearly non-competent agents. In 2010, Mumbai University took the decision to drop the renowned author, Rohinton Mistry´s book, *Such a Long Journey*, – winner of the *Commonwealth Writers' prize*, amongst others, and shortlisted for the 1991 *Booker Prize*, – from the second year Bachelor of Arts syllabus; after the nationalist *Shiv Sena* party objected to the so called "derogatory references to party members" (Pinglay, 2010, p. para. 1); (Biswas, 2011). Mistry himself had this comment to make: "A political party demanded an immediate change in syllabus, and Mumbai University provided deluxe service via express delivery," (as cited in Pinglay, 2010). Typically, none of the politicians or figures who instigated the withdrawal of the book or expressed opinions on the matter had actually taken the trouble to read it either before or after implementation of the censorship. To quote from The New York Times Associated Press:

> India is the world's largest democracy and has made huge economic leaps in the last few decades to become a key Asian power. And yet, as its official and unofficial bans show, this country of 1.2 billion continues to grapple with a complex tangle of deep sensitivities and a political process that is deeply influenced by religious and caste loyalties (The New York Times, 2015, p. para. 3).[148]

[148] See: http://www.publicbooks.org/interviews/indian-writers-under-siege-a-roundtable



(6.2) FIGURE - 148

Photograph of Safdar Hashmi, (n.d.). Courtesy of JANAM & Youth Ki Awaaz.

Retrieved from: https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2016/06/safdar-hashmi-street-theatre-legend/

http://li186-51.members.linode.com/article/safdar-hashmi-the-indian-brecht

6.2-THE SAHMAT COLLECTIVE: ART AND ACTIVISM IN INDIA SINCE 1989

Safdar (12 April 1954 – 2 January 1989)

So you missed the demolition of the Babri Masjid
And the violence and hate that followed
You missed Ramabai and other Dalit massacres
You missed your nation's love for the atom bomb
In 2002, you missed the Gujarat pogrom
And in neighbouring Pakistan you missed
The creation of the Taliban and here
This year you missed the coronation of killers

We who survived you missed none of these
We missed you.

(Anand Patwardhan)

Sabse khatarnaak hota hai hamaare sapnon ka mar jaana. (There is nothing more dangerous than the death of our dreams)

(Avtar Singh Sandhu, [9 September 1950-23 March 1988] pen name: Paash)

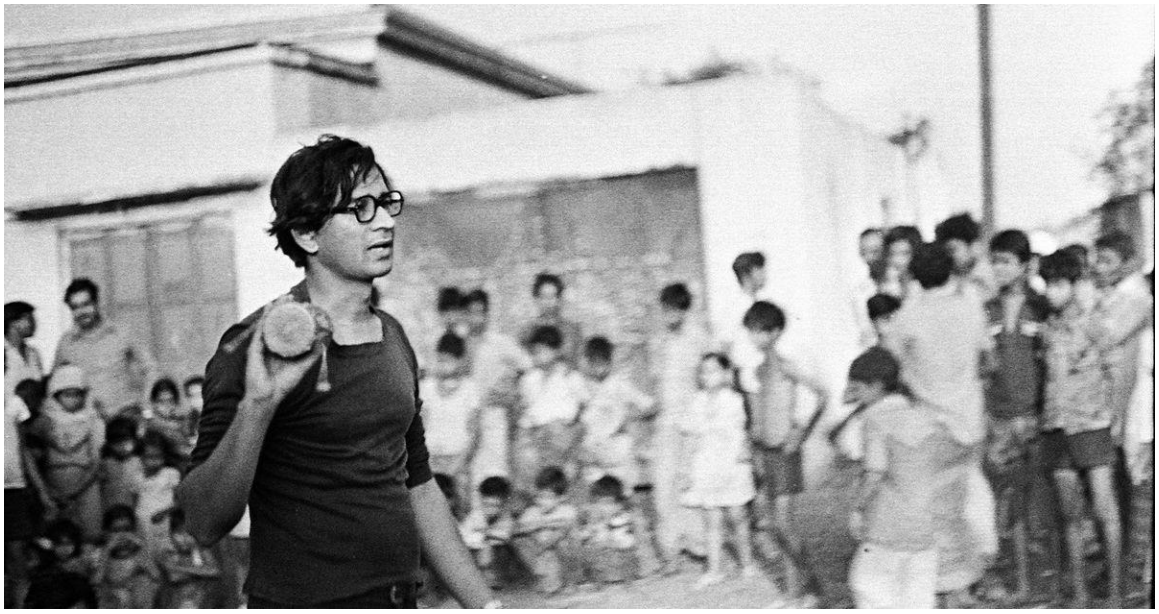
In 1973, a very young Safdar Hashmi co-founded a theatre group called *Jana Natya Manch* (People's Theatre Front) with the acronym JANAM which means a *New Birth* in Sanskrit and Hindi. Safdar Hashmi was the son of Haneef and Qamar Azad Hashmi. He grew up in Delhi and Aligarh, where he was exposed to a liberal Marxist environment, going on to study English language and literature

at St. Stephen's College, Delhi University. As a university student, he became a member of the *Indian People's Theatre Association*, later on going on to join the Marxist *Communist Party of India* (CPI); becoming a leader of the party a few years later (2003); (2008). He worked as a columnist for *The Economic Times*, a Sunday paper, wrote documentaries and television scripts while also teaching in diverse universities including in Srinagar, Kashmir, and working as the Press Information Officer for the West Bengal Government information Centre in Delhi, for a period of time. However, Safdar later gave up many of these activities to become a fulltime political cultural activist. His main objective became "to develop a kind of political theatre that would effectively express the emotions and concerns of India's working class and peasantry" (Erven, 1988, p. 32).

Safdar was unquestionably brilliant, a highly creative and intelligent playwright, director and theoretician; with a unique talent for political theatre. Highly versatile in his creative output, he also wrote songs, children's poetry and literature. As a member of CPI his creativity and ideology were intertwined and inseparable and his political and creative influence remain far reaching and powerful, over 30 years after his death; as numerous artists and actors who knew him personally, or not, continue to testify to the immense influence he has had on shaping them in their respective professions.[149]

[149] See Nandita Das' talk: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3D6Hvf3FgQ
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKDyVcHL_H0

(continuación de la nota al pie)



(6.2) FIGURE - 149

Safdar Hashmi, (n.d) during a performance. Photo Courtesy of *Jan Natya Manch* (JANAM). Retrieved from: http://jananatyamanch.org/images/photogallery/SafdarArchives/6.jpg

By 1988, fifteen years after its founding, JANAM had already performed at least 4000 times in over twenty plays, most of which had been written by Safdar Hashmi. At least eleven of the plays have been translated into all the major Indian languages. In 1988, just a year before his assassination, Eugène Van Erven spent five days with Safdar Hashmi while she carried out research into "genuinely effective political theatre" (Erven, 1988, p. 32). She states that

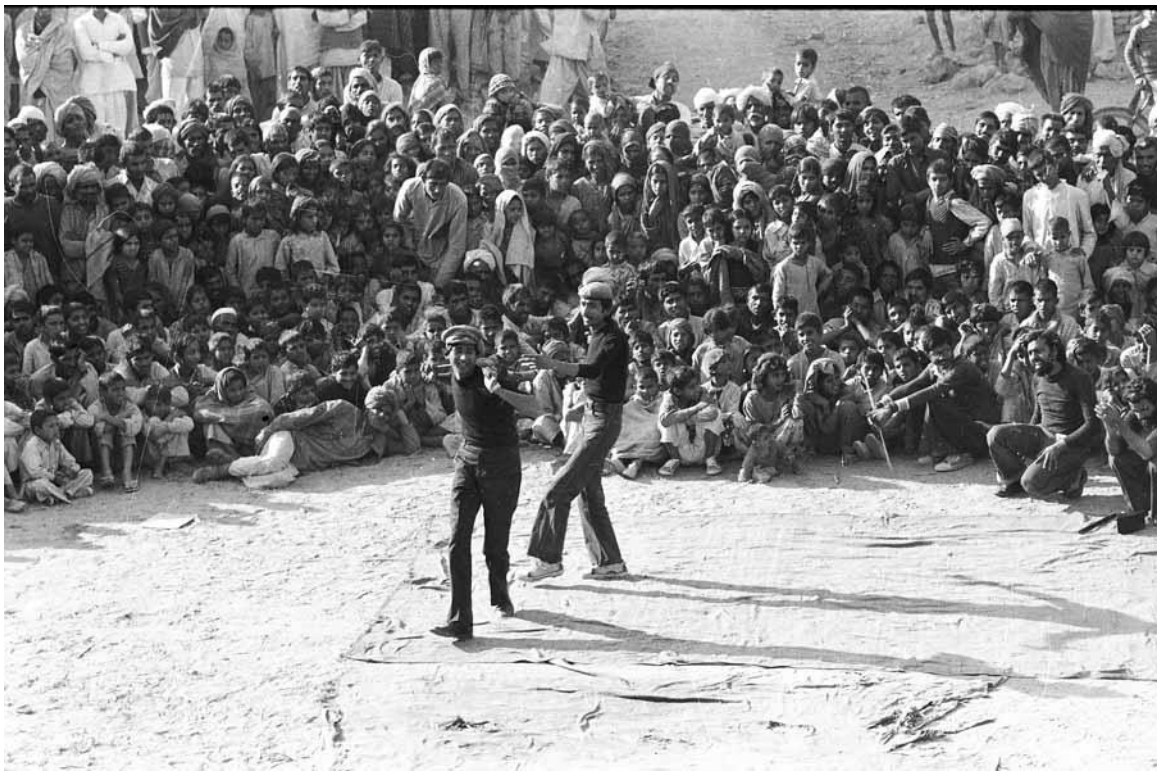
> JANAMS original plays always relate to a specific social or political issue and therefore the troup's curriculum vitae reads like an alternative cultural history of India's past 15 years. Not surprisingly, it reveals a different picture from the one presented by the international media and the official records: no smiling motherly Indira or charming, chubby Rajiv married to an Italian hotel owner's daughter, but a ruthless dynasty of powermongers keeping their mass of 800 million starving people in a stranglehold (Erven, 1988, pp. 34-35).

Thirty one years later, the dynasties that rule in India have changed but the ruthless power mongering continues, morphed into other forms of dominions. During this period JANAM's plays which were all performed outdoors on makeshift stages were full length performances in working class areas with clear evidence of the troup's interactions with the organised left. They also performed musicals for workers striking and manifesting in front of factories. The plays drew enormous crowds of between six and seven thousand spectators and the initially inexperienced members of the group who had little or no training in theatre learnt the ropes of theatre acting and performance as they performed. Just a year after its founding, by 1974, the performances attracted up to 15000 spectators, far beyond what the group felt prepared for. See: (6.2) FIGURE - 150 and (6.2) FIGURE - 151. They advertised their performances using loudspeakers and a microphone driving around the city in a rickshaw. Records indicate that on

occasions some shows attracted up to 35000 people, obliging the group to raise their stages to permit viewing, including also the need to lengthen the days of scheduled performances. See: (6.2) FIGURE - 152, (6.2) FIGURE - 153 and (6.2) FIGURE - 154.

(6.2) FIGURE - 150

Members of the *Jan Natya Manch* (JANAM) perform *Halla Bol*, written by Safdar Hashmi, on the Calcutta University campus in 1989. Courtesy of: The Telegraph file photo. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/safdar-hashmi-a-death-foretold/cid/1680637



(6.2) FIGURE - 151

Safdar Hashmi and NK Sharma, (n.d.), performing in *Aya Chunav*. Courtesy of Jananatyamanch.org. Retrieved from: http://jananatyamanch.org/images/photogallery/SafdarArchives/9.jpg

JANAM, without reservations or hesitance described themselves as a "militant political theatre of protest" (as cited in Gopalakrishnan, 2003, para. 2). Their plays, which were tenaciously incendiary, aimed to address questions of caste, class, gender, and religious sectarianism. Safdar Hashmi reconceived the somewhat common concept of art as a bourgeois, individualistic, aesthetic pursuit, and turned it into a political and cultural collective pursuit for change.

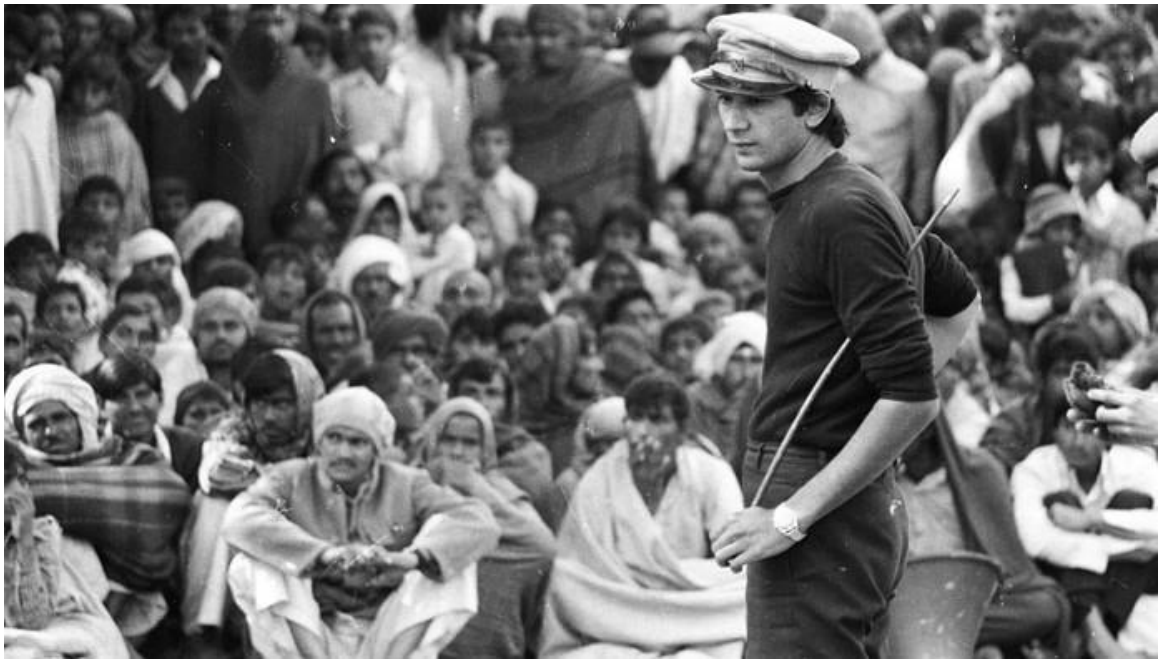
(6.2) FIGURE - 152

Scenes from the performance of *Halla Bol* by members of JANAM at the site of Safdar Hashmi's assassination 48 hours later on 4 January 1989. Photo Courtesy of: Jana Natya Manch

Retrieved from: https://www.thequint.com/voices/blogs/safdar-hashmi-death-anniversary-jana-natya-manch-blog-playwright

The events that turned JANAM into a full-fledged activist and protest theatre group that challenged each new landmark political event with a new theatre performance, are highly significant. On June 12 1975, Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha, at the Allahabad high court in Uttar Pradesh, ruled that Indira Gandhi's

election victory had been the result of electoral malpractice. He condemned her to vacate her seat in parliament and resign as Prime Minister (Prakash, 2015).

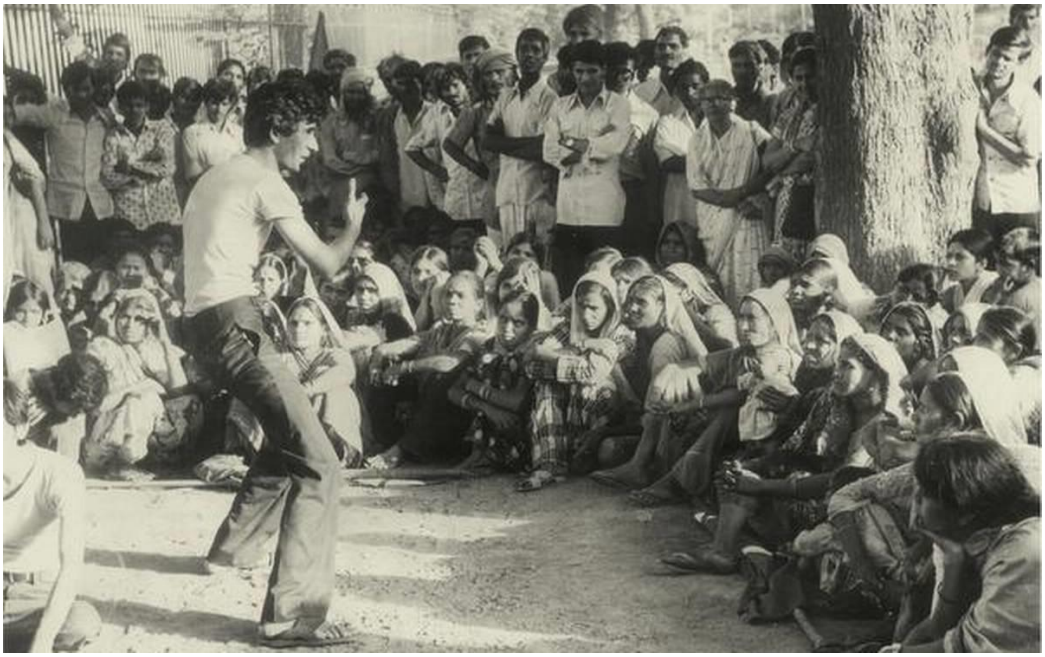


(6.2) FIGURE - 153

Surendra Rajan, (1980). Safdar Hashmi in performance of *Aya Chunao*.
Courtesy of Surendra Rajan and Jana Natya Manch.
Retrieved from: https://mayday.leftword.com/blog/post/the-writing-of-halla-bol-the-death-and-life-of-safdar-hashmi-part-3/

The very next day, immediately following the ruling, Indira Gandhi declared a State Emergency, suspending basic rights, imposing media censorship and having all her political opponents arrested. By all records, within days the country became a "virtual police state" (Erven, 1988, p. 38), a situation that lasted for approximately 18 months.

Following these events, Safdar wrote a small skit called *Kursi, Kursi Kursi,* translated as *Chair, Chair, Chair*. The piece was about an elected king whose chair gets stuck to him with no possibility of separating him from it. The piece was performed just outside the premises of a club called the *Boat Club Lawns*, known to be a popular hub where politicians and parties held their rallies. It was also an area where almost 150 government employees worked. "We would go under the shade of a tree and start playing our skit. Within seconds, thousands of people would gather. The skit grew every day. We would add new things *[sic]*," (as cited in Erven, 1988, p. 38).



(6.2) FIGURE - 154

Safdar Hashmi, (n.d.) during a performance. Photo Courtesy of JANAM. Retrieved from: https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/times-they-arent-a-changin/article25796560.ece#

However, with the declaration of the emergency, Safdar and his theatre group were forced into inactivity. Safdar moved to Kashmir where he worked as an English teacher at Kashmir University. Three years later, in October 1978, Safdar returned to continue with his mission. In an industrial town outside Delhi, some factory workers had gone on strike; not for economic reasons, but due to the employers' refusal to provide them with a space to park their bicycles, to be able to have a cup of tea and a small clay oven in order to heat up their lunches. They rode in to work daily from distances of 15 to 20 kilometres away.

The political atmosphere was tense, the *Janatha Party* had just come into government; memories of police brutality during the emergency against striking workers were still very fresh. The industry owner hired armed gangs and employed them as guards in uniform. At some point the guards opened fire on the workers killing six of them. On hearing of the incidence, Safdar Hashmi decided to write a play about the events. Thus, *Machine* was conceived.

> A friend and I sat down one night to write and practically on its own something started to emerge. We created dialogs almost naturally. Both of us had some talent in writing rhyming dialog. Soon the image of a machine was born. We wanted to use it as a metaphor for the system. The different component of the machine would be the worker, the guard, and the owner. Each of them would talk about their relationship to the machine. We would them show how together they made the machine work and how this

> collaboration was experienced differently by the worker, the guard, and the owner, (as cited in Erven, 1988, p. 39).

Machine was barely 13 minutes long, it was written jointly by Safdar Hashmi and Rakesh Saxena and it was "poetic, funny, moving and inspiring" (Deshpande, 2017, p. para.10). It premiered the same year, in 1978 and coincided with a new industrial relations regulation that permitted local governments to arrest union labour leaders during strikes. On the announcement of the new bill, the *All-India* trade union held a meeting in the *Talkatora* stadium of New Delhi, convening over seven thousand trade union delegates. The next day saw a mass gathering of two hundred thousand workers on the premises of the Boat Club. This was indeed a unique moment in time for JANAM to premiere *Machine*.

> We went to the stadium early in the morning and we pleaded and pleaded with the organizer to allow us to presents our play to them. But they couldn't see what a play had to do with a serious trade union session. We kept on pestering them. […] We stayed until eventing. Finally they got sick and tired of us and told us we could perform after the final resolutions and slogans had been passed. […] The way the stadium was built helped us. It's an arena. […] We were all wearing black tunics and blue trousers. We were five men and one woman, my wife. The moment the final slogans died down people were beginning to file out of the stadium, imagine these six strange people in black running to the middle of the court and quickly

> mounting a human machine with loud hissing, rhythmic sounds. People turned around to watch what the hell was happening. Normally we run the machine for 20 seconds at the most but since there was a lot of noise in the hall we went on running it or two minutes. We had to do it at a very high pitch so we were exhausted after that. You see, the nearest person in the audience was at least 60 feet away from us. Then they finally became silent. I gave a signal to stop the machine and started speaking, (Hashmi, as cited in Erven, 1988, p. 41).

The show was a resounding success with both trade union delegates and the workers. Safdar Hashmi states, "The leaders were like kids. They lifted us on their shoulders. We became heroes. People took our autographs on cigarette packets;" (as cited in Erven, 1988, p. 41). The following day JANAM performed *Machine* at the Boat Club to an estimated audience of 160,000 workers. *Machine* became a tremendous symbol of resistance and inspiration. Within a month of its premiere, performances of *Machine* were being held all around the country. People used recordings that had been made from the premier show to recreate the play in their villages and towns. People translated the piece into their local languages to put on performances that were accessible to all.

On May 2 1988, on the festival of May Day, the performance of *Machine* was disrupted by an organised gang of right-winged hooligans who forced the show to be interrupted. This was a common occurrence, and happened quite

regularly, including at times violent assaults on the theatre group. *Machine* became legendary amongst the working class populations of India, the public came to know the script so well that they would whisper the dialogue along with the performers, giving the show a hauntingly poignant ritualistic effect.

Before Safdar Hashmi's assassination, JANAM had already performed plays specifically addressing a wide array of topics. *Gaon Se Shahar Tak* (From Village to City, 1978) is a play that highlights the situation of many small scale farmers. Here, a farmer loses his small plot of land and is forced to migrate to the city where he becomes a factory worker. *Hayare* (Killers, 1979) is a play that confronts the issue of religious strife and the violent conflicts between Hindus, Muslims and Sikh populations. *Aurat* (Woman, 1979) was amongst the very first pieces to bring upfront the issue of gender violence in India, through bride burning, dowry killings and wife battering. Numerous other pieces that deal specifically with the immensely complex fabric of India's poorer communities were created and performed. Eugène van Erven reminisces of her memories and the five days she spent getting to know Safdar Hashmi.

> Dusty Delhi had become a much more pleasant place with the knowledge that such friendly, smiling, gentle people as Hashmi lived there. Suddenly I was so much more hopeful about the future of India's divided art movement. Young, energetic, bright, and charming, Hashmi seemed to possess the qualities and the vision to pull it all together (Erven, 1988, p. 45).

Early in the afternoon, of New Year's Day, on January 1 1989, JANAM was giving a performance of *Halla Bol* (Raise your voice!), Safdar Hashmi's latest play, which focused on the long and ongoing suppression of the labour movement by government forces. The play was being performed in *Jhandapur* in *Sahibabad*, an industrial town east of Delhi. A few minutes into the play, Mukesh Sharma, a right-wing political candidate of the *Congress Party* arrived on the scene accompanied by more than 100 hired hoodlums armed with iron rods, bamboo sticks and guns. Amit protests from the crowds, he ordered the performance to be stopped, an order that Safdar Hashmi refused to fulfill. Mukesh Sharma and his hired goons launched a violent attack on the theatre group; Sharma himself was seen firing at point blank range on a migrant worker who was killed instantly. The crowds of audience fled in a panic while all of JANAM's members ran to a Trade Union Office nearby to take refuge, barricading themselves behind an iron gate. Safdar Hashmi's wife, Moloyashree wrote in a declaration that they had planned to escape by climbing over a back wall.

> In order to give us time to escape over the back wall, Safdar held the door closed as long as he could. It was inevitable that Safdar bore the entire brunt of the attack. The goons dragged his body through the streets back to the performance site and killed him there with innumerable blows to the head. It was obvious that the thugs wanted to kill – there was not a scratch on the rest of Safdar's body (as cited in Erven, 1989, p. 46).

Newspaper and magazine reports stated that Hashmi had folded his arms in front of his chest in a humble surrender when he was overcome and the thugs broke through the gate. Despite his peaceful surrender, they beat him repeatedly on the head with bricks, iron rods and bamboo sticks while the police were nowhere to be seen. Sudhanva Deshpande, who was a member of JANAM states that they took Safdar Hashmi to the nearby *Narendra Mohan Hospital* and later to the *Ram Manohar Lohia* hospital in Delhi. Meanwhile, news of the attack had spread like wildfire and hundreds of people flocked to the hospital gates to stand vigil, praying for Safdar's recovery. Soon it became clear that Safdar would not survive the attack; he finally died of his injuries on the night of 2 January and was cremated the next day. His funeral was attended by over 15000 people (Deshpande, 2017).[150] See: (6.2) FIGURE - 155 and (6.2) FIGURE - 156.

> Safdar's funeral stunned the government. There were industrial workers, theatre people, students, housewives, musicians, artists, political leaders, and the general public walking in this miles long funeral procession. It was anger against a brutal act committed by political goons that brought them out on the street. It was about freedom of expression and artistic freedom (M.K. Raina, as cited in Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 38)

[150] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQKADHoSxAo

On 3 November, 2003, fourteen years after Safdar Hashmi's murder, Mukesh Sharma and twelve others were found guilty of his assassination; two of the people involved had already died (2003).

Forty eight hours after Safdar Hashmi's assassination, on January 4 1989, JANAM as well as Safdar's widow, Moloyashree, went back to the site of the performance and crime scene and finished the performance of *Halla Bol* to an audience of several thousand people who had come to Delhi from all over the country to mourn the deaths of Safdar Hashmi and Ram Bahadur, the Nepalese migrant worker. See: (6.2) FIGURE - 152, (6.2) FIGURE - 157 and (6.2) FIGURE - 158.

(6.2) FIGURE - 155

Over 15,000 people join Safdar Hashmi's funeral procession. Photo Courtesy of: Jana Natya Manch. Retrieved from: https://www.thequint.com/voices/blogs/safdar-hashmi-death-anniversary-jana-natya-manch-blog-playwright

"It was a stirring act of courage, commitment and defiance. I acted in the performance, and the memory of that morning still gives me goosebumps" (Deshpande, 2017, p. para. 23). January 9 marked a National Day of Protest in which Safdar Hashmi's plays and songs were performed all over the country. The occasion united in a collective protest, unlike any seen in contemporary Indian history, every single progressive artist in the country. At the opening ceremony of the Bombay International Film Festival, Shabana Azmi, one of India's major film actress, – famous not only for her numerous roles in Bollywood films but also in major alternative productions such as Deepa Mehta's films *Fire*, and *Earth*, and

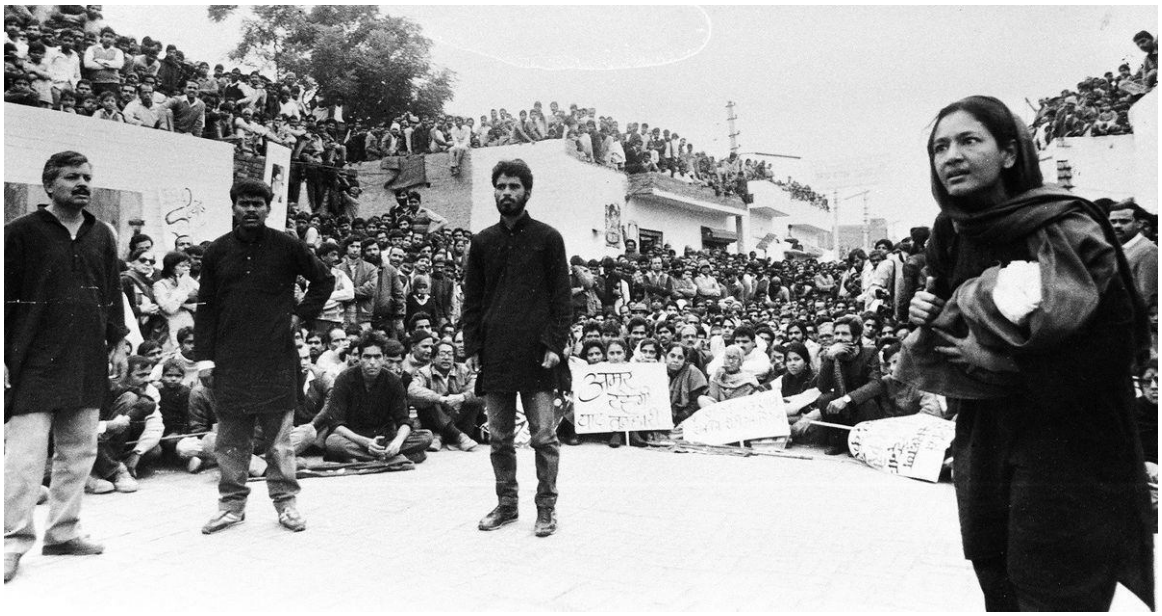
Roland Joffé's *City of Joy,* based on the book by Dominic La Pierre and starring Patrick Swayze – made a statement that directly implicated Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi's son and leader of the congress party at the time, in Hashmi's assassination.

(6.2) FIGURE - 156

Ram Rahman, (1989). Safdar Hashmi's Funeral Procession, January 3, 1989, New Delhi. Courtesy of Ram Rahman. Retrieved from: https://mag.uchicago.edu/arts-humanities/raised-voices

Artists from around the country cancelled their commitments and joined in a nation-wide protest marches and demonstrations; laying wide open India's farce and popular claim of being *the world's largest democracy*. Safdar Hashmi's "brutal, politically motivated death aroused a spontaneous, nationwide wave of revulsion, grief, and resistance, transforming him from outspoken political artist

to a lasting symbol of the very values that his murderers had sought to crush" (Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 26).

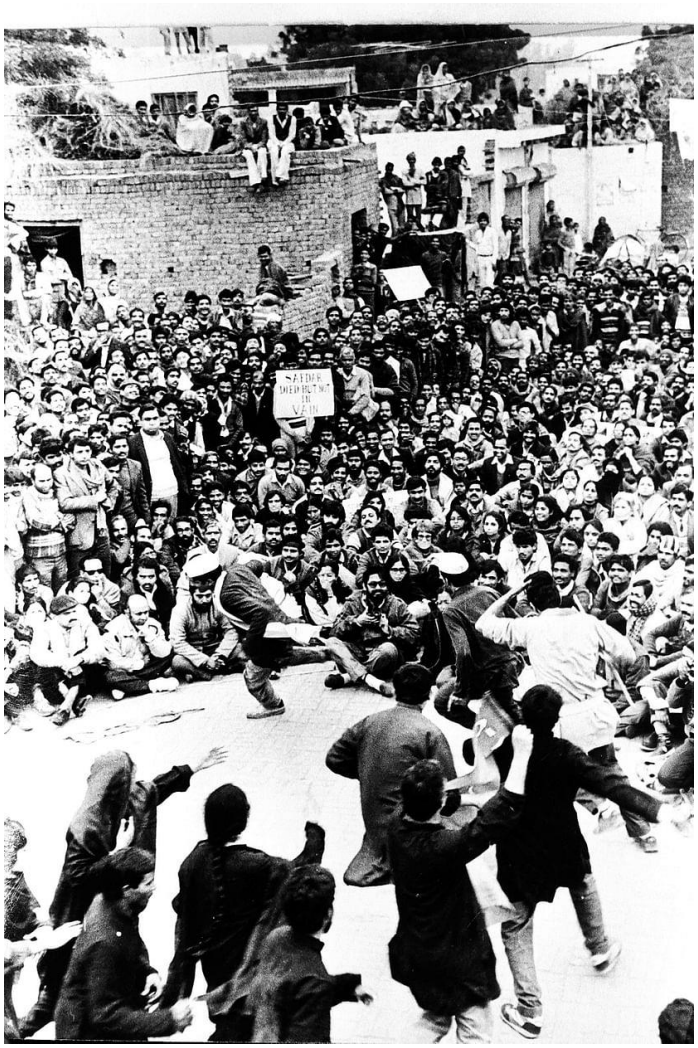


(6.2) FIGURE - 157

Safdar Hashmi's wife, Moloyashree and Jana Natya Manch perform in *Halla Bol* at the same location as it was interrupted two days after Safdar's assassination. Photograph Courtesy of: Jana Natya Manch. Retrieved from: https://www.newsclick.in/remembering-safdar-hashmi-and-play-changed-indian-street-theatre-forever

Safdar Hashmi's murder is unquestionably significant in throwing a light on the inherent scourges in the politics of a county that claims to be the largest democracy, where, in reality, there is an absolute intolerance of free speech and a haven harbour for politics with criminal connection. Safdar Hashmi was killed because he dared to flaunt his sincere belief in liberal democracy which clashed

with the brutal forces of criminal impunity in Indian politics. Many others like Hashmi have died as a result of a failed democracy and the same lack of constitutional rights and morality; factors that are indispensable in a true democracy. Safdar Hashmi was born into of an intellectual family of relative wealth and high social standing. He was brought up to believe in liberal values and in a Marxist philosophy.



(6.2) FIGURE - 158

JANAM performs *Halla Bol* on 4 January 1989, at the site of the attack, less than 48 hours after Safdar Hashmi's death. Courtesy of Jana Natya Manch

Retrieved from: https://www.thequint.com/voices/blogs/safdar-hashmi-death-anniversary-jana-natya-manch-blog-playwright

> Everything Safdar did and stood for – the values, the ideals, and the activities with which Safdar was associated where he was investing every ounce of his energy – was all dedicated in the service of society. He was doing it neither for self-promotion, nor for publicity, nor for earning material comforts for himself. His aim was to expose the internal contradictions of our society. He was fighting, struggling for social justice (Bhisham Sahni, as cited in Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 37).

Safdar was well aware to the path he chose to lead. He could have chosen to live a risk free life of comfort as an administrator or in any other secure position; instead he chose to educate and raise awareness, a road which he knew would be bumpy and dangerous. He sought to get as close to the working classes as possible, striving to teach them to join forces and fight as one, democratically and non-violently for equal rights. To fulfil this quest, he employed theatre as a means through which to spread his message and convey his beliefs. Hashmi was an intellectual activist and from the late 1970s onwards his performances addressed vital and fragmented political issues in India that continue to be unresolved over thirty years later. These included issues such as gender violence and violence against women, corruption in government, poverty and rural development, amongst others.

Hashmi worked to democratize theatre—both in the way it was created and in the way it was presented. Janam developed plays collectively and performed them amid the people whose issues they addressed. He believed in the power of the written word, of colloquialisms, of music and of satire, to craft plays that his working-class audience could engage with; to share with them tools that enable them to deconstruct hegemonic narratives and ask questions that empower them.

He was committed to subverting the idea of art as a bastion of the elite and providing a rich, cultural experience to the masses. His politics and his creative expression were inseparable but he strove to find a balance between aesthetics, entertainment and messaging. He was neither willing to patronize his audience with propaganda, nor was he willing to deliver a cathartic experience designed to evade harsher realities (Tiwari, 2015, pp. para. 6-7).

Vidyarthy Chatterjee also states,

Hashmi was too astute a student of history and too perceptive an observer of the social and economic realities of his time to not realize that given the existing character of the Indian ‘system’, violent confrontation with the propertied and the privileged would amount to a battle lost before it had even begun. That, in spite of his sagacious understanding of conditions on

> the ground, violence visited him the way it did carries a lesson immersed in sadness and irony (Chatterjee V. , 2019, p. para. 8).

JANAM did not suffer the terrible death as did its brilliant founder. Safdar Hashmi's cruel assassination became the foundation for what was to become one of the biggest art collectives in India, *SAHMAT*. SAHMAT – which means *In Agreement* in Sanskrit and Hindi – is an acronym for the *Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust*. SAHMAT was founded by Safdar's sister, Shabnam and has its base in Delhi. It brings together artists, writers, musicians, actors, activists and scholars from all over the country. Initially funded for its start-up by support from the Communist Party, members established an agreement of no affiliation to any political party, thus ensuring its objectivity and survival for over thirty years. The collaborative action and political activism of the SAHMAT artistic community crosses over the barriers of class, caste, and religion, involving the participation of hundreds of artists from across the country. In its efforts SAHMAT has consciously strived to diverge from established and conventional formats of art creation and presentation. Ram Rahman, founding member of the collective states,

> As the Indian art scene has fallen victim to the globalised art market and the pressures of the aesthetic associated with international biennial exhibitions, the Sahmat platform has provided a space for showing and making art that speaks to more personal and local concerns. […] Many

> artists shifted from figuration to more conceptual installation and assemblage. Sahmat's projects also reflect the camaraderie and community spirit of the Indian art scene, where artist of different generations and philosophical outlook still have a close-knit sense of community and purpose (Rahman, 2013, p. 17).

In 2013, *The Smart Museum of Art* at the University of Chicago, also known as the *David and Alfred Smart Museum at the University of Chicago* organised the first retrospective exhibition in the USA of the SAHMAT group titled *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism since 1989.* The exhibition was curated by one of SAHMAT's founding members and an independent collector, Ram Rahman, and Jessica Moss, the consulting curator of contemporary art at the University of Chicago Smart Museum Of Art. It included approximately 170 pieces demonstrating the collective's twenty years of activity. Amongst the pieces in the exhibition there were also posters, brochures and books, alongside archival material, tent banners and video performances. It was a unique display of the collaborations between contemporary art, society and politics in India and included media that have helped to "expand the field of contemporary art- making and that have rarely found space in the discourse on Indian contemporary art" (Rahman, 2013, p. 17). Jessica Moss states,

> Because Sahmat has been a platform for every kind of cultural production, the exhibit's range is broad—paintings, children's book illustrations,

> posters, an installation of an inverted boat with built-in wheels and handles. Each piece reflects the collective's founding purpose: to defend freedom of expression and combat intolerance in India (as cited in Muhlenkamp, 2013, para. 4).

The Smart retrospective covered the historical events of Indian politics and the creative initiatives of the SAHMAT collective in response to these events. It brought together "some of the most compelling works produced by members of the collective since its founding in 1989" (Elam, 2013, p. 135). Amongst the group's principle concerns was establishing resistance in the face of what is termed *communalism* in India, in referring to ever increasing violence and clashes between religious and political groups, as Indian politics took on increasingly sectarian characteristics. SAHMAT has created waves demanding freedom of expression, through performances and installations that endorse amongst many other issues of human and civil rights, "secularism, a re-evaluation of M. K. Gandhi's legacy, new and alternative histories for India, mobility rights, attention to poverty and women's right to expression" (Elam, 2013, p. 135). As such, to be found in the exhibition were projects with titles like, *Slogans for Communal Harmony* (1992), *Hum Sab Ayodha (We are all Ayodha)* (1993), *Art on the Move* (2001), *Ways of Resisting* (2003) as well as a number of ongoing tributes to painter M.F. Hussain that began in 2006 – the year when he left India due to persecution.

The Delhi and Bombay initiatives of *Slogans for Communal Harmony* (1992) involved drivers of auto rickshaws and taxis who were paid to paint secular slogans of religious tolerance and empathy on their vehicles which travelled the length of the towns and cities. SAHMAT also awarded prizes to the drivers for coming up with their own slogans of acceptance and tolerance. This resulted in winning captions such as *Deeds and not birth make a man great* and *everyone feels hungry and needs bread to satisfy that hunger*; *neither hunger has any religion nor does bread know such barriers* (Elam, 2013, p. 136). Rickshaw drivers who travel all over the cities are rarely originally from the cities they comb, they are also amongst the first to suffer the consequences of communal violence. As such, the slogan initiative was something that the drivers related to on a personal level. The slogans remained visible for years and were also seen on street panels and fences. There were also slogan projections at cinema theatres prior to the beginning of shows.

In the Smart Museum Exhibition an auto rickshaw is presented with one of the winning slogans. It is set in front of a photograph in the background of the original city street fair where it was found. Two children peek out to the rear window of the rickshaw which displays a slogan above them that read in Hindi, *India is a golden bird; India my motherland is great; may it shine like gold* (Moss & Rahman, 2013, pp. 82-83). See: (6.2) FIGURE - 159. Other slogans on rickshaws from photograph samples of the exhibit were,

Just as the faith of the passenger matters little to the driver, as all have to be delivered home, similarly, for the unity of the nation, the faith of the citizens matters little. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, all have to be embraced.

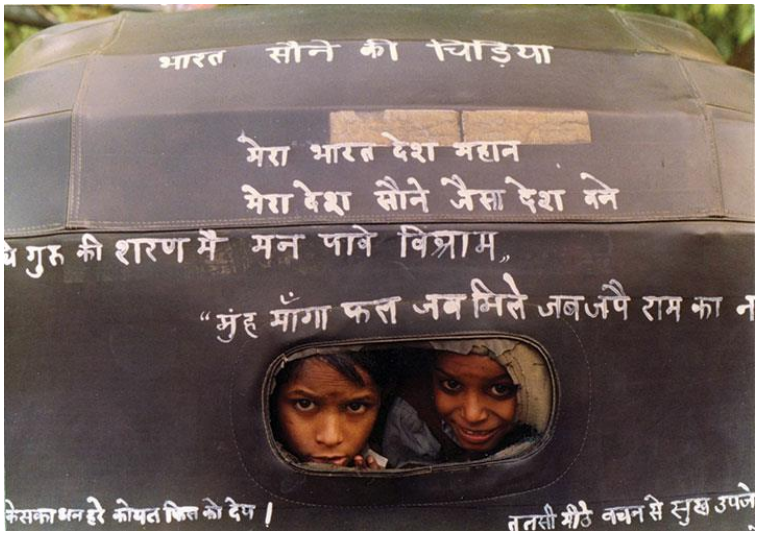
I have a dream of love. That the world of love be filled with colours of joy. And all of India be a picture of unity.

Go ahead and drench the streets in blood. But what will you do when the nation needs it? (Moss & Rahman, 2013, pp. 84-85).[151]

In terms of mobility rights SAHMAT has drawn attention to the issues of 'movement and mobility' in India as concerns populations' rights to land and the issues of forced migration, often caused by bloody and violent religious conflicts. The migration of villagers from their rural homes to the urban metropolis in their quest for improved opportunities; alongside the forced displacement of large groups of populations which seems to be in the order of the day in India are also tackled by the SAHMAT collective.[152] Added to this are other concepts of movement such as labour migration to the USA, the UK and the Gulf, this includes the *brain drain* of intellectuals as well as the forced exile of controversial thinkers and artists.

[151] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJNfMZkbMXI

[152] See: The Cost of Living, by Arundhati Roy



(6.2) FIGURE - 159

"India is a golden bird; India my motherland is great; may it shine like gold". Courtesy of: The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago

Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/smartmuseum/photos/a.10151824322958782/10151824323048782/?type=3&theater

In drawing attention to the issues of rights and displacement, the ongoing, never ending, horrendous conflicts, and persecution in Kashmir; *Burial* by Veer Munshi is a highly poignant piece which Moss and Rahman presented in the Smart exhibition as an installation. In this piece, a small boat is placed capsized in a mobile cart with ten images of the same Kashmiri man. Each image is classified with a different adjective tag. Thus the same man is labelled as a *Secessionist,* an *Extremist,* a *Fundamentalist,* a *Terrorist,* a *Militant,* as well as *Killed, Displaced,* a *Migrant, Exiled,* and a *Refugee*. The work is an open critique of the way in which Indian government propaganda represents the Kashmiri population who live have been living for years under stifling military control and persecution. "[…] the boat […] no longer has "laughing girls [who] place in it their bouquets of fresh flowers" (Munshi, as cited in Elam, 2013, p. 137). *Burial* is a haunting

juxtaposition of current mobility with past mobility; free mobility with restricted mobility" (Elam, 2013, p. 137).

One of SAHMAT's major contributions was in response to the December 1992 destruction of the 16th century *Babri Masjid* (Babur's Mosque) by a mob of Hindu extremists. The *Babri Masjid* was located in *Ayodhya*, in Uttar Pradesh, in a site that had been controversial for numerous years, as Hindus considered it to be the holy birth place of *Lord Rama*. A Hindu temple, said to have been demolished by Muslims in order to build the *Babri Masjid*, is supposed to have marked the birth spot of Rama. Years before the attack on the mosque, organisations and parties with extreme Hindu identities, including the currently ruling *Bharatiya Janta Party* (BJP) promoted the idea that the specific site of the mosque was originally a Hindu temple, and as such, it must be reclaimed from the Muslims as part of Hindu heritage. In December 1992, a supposedly peaceful political rally turned ugly and violent. "[…] an army of people took pick axes and hammers to the mosque. Within five hours, all three domes had been destroyed" (Muhlenkamp, 2013, p. para. 8).

In response to the demolition of the *Babri Masjid*, SAHMAT organised a series of events and actions which lasted a year. Amongst these, there was an exhibition of academic texts and artistic creations that explored the multidimensional and complex history of Ayodhya. The exhibition also gave rise to major dispute as the accompanying text was affirmed as sacrilegious by Hindu organisations and snatched by the Delhi police. Ram Rahman also took the

exhibition to the USA, where it was equally controversial, occasioning conflicts amongst Hindu nationalist sympathizers in the USA. Ram Rahman states that the point was

> to bring in a certain dialogue about that issue, about that city, and talk about its multicultural history. The idea was that you show how every little piece of [India] is totally multicultural. It doesn't represent a single group of people or a single religion or a single social set (as cited in (Muhlenkamp, 2013, p. para. 10).

Rahman also highlights that the work created by the SAHMAT collective ought to be viewed through a lens of *culture wars* within the context of "the complexities of India's ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic mix" (Rahman, 2013, p. 17). Historians who are part of the SAHMAT collective have drawn attention to the dangerous "political projection of distorted history that was used to justify the destruction of the Babri Masjid" (Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 204). In 1998, *The National Democratic Alliance* (NDA) government led by the *Bharatiya Janta Party* came into power. Amongst the first actions that it took was to "revamp the curricular frameworks of school and university education, and to begin rewriting history and social science textbooks to propagate communal versions of history in classrooms (Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 204). Senior scholars, academics and educationalists coincided in the fact that these curricular changes were not only unscientific, they were highly divisive. They came

together using SAHMAT as a platform of dissidence from which to alert the public and condemn these non-scientific changes and their implications.

Publications in the form of books and magazines were distributed and symposiums and conferences were held with the firm intent to counter these corruptive interventions in education. In August 2001, a major national conference was held in New Delhi; bringing together ministers of education from the non NDA ruled states with historians, economists, scientists, educationists, university vice chancellors, academics, representatives of Teachers' association, artists, cultural activists, and other experts and intellectuals. A major debate was initiated regarding the issues and consequences of these changes in textbooks and education in India. The convention was the first of a sustained series of campaigns by Sahmat, over the next four years, aimed at combating the government intent to present a communal interpretation of Indian history and polity through the use of textbooks written without a scientific basis. SAHMAT held numerous press conferences over these issues with historians and academics and organised six more conventions in November 2001, December 2002, June 2004, May 2005, August 2005 and September 2005.

(6.2) FIGURE - 160

M. F. Husain, (1989). *Safdar Hashmi*. [Acrylic on Canvas, 317.5 x 167.64 cm]. Courtesy of the artist and Artnet. Retrieved from: http://www.artnet.com/artists/mf-husain/safdar-hashmi-nzR-04ukLPV65FrmuuzAUg2

6.3-URBAN ARTISTS AND THE QUEST FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Women in Public Spaces: Do Public Spaces Only Belong To Men?

(Ghosh, 2016)

Jasmeen Patheja and Roshnee Desai are two practising visual artists who have in comparable manners used their art practice as a tool through which to ask some uncomfortable, but necessary questions. They are both urban artists whose work interactively involves and is aimed directly at the general public. They use their art to aggressively challenge the oppressive, highly invasive phenomenon of the male gaze; a reality that is present in every public space in India. Any woman who has walked down a street in an Indian town or city will have on innumerable occasions experienced the almost physical aggression of an invasive stare, a despicable, sneering ogle, at times accompanied by lecherous gestures, comments, or worse still, gropes or even rape.

Despite the Safer Cities Programme initiative known as the UN-Habitat *For A Better Urban Future* which was launched in 1996 and involved 77 cities in 24 countries around the world, (2012); there are no safe public spaces in Indian towns

and cities. In June 2011, *UNICEF, UN-HABITAT AND UN Women* joined forces in a five year programme called "Safe and Friendly Cities for All" (2011). However, according to the overall 2017 results of the Safe Cities Index titled *Security in a rapidly urbanising world* published in the Economist, Delhi ranks 43, and Mumbai 45 out of 60 cities, well behind Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Mexico City, which rank 37, 38 and 39 respectively. The report also states that, "in many cities, security is falling rather than rising" (The Economist , 2017, p. para.13).

The blatant inexistence of public spaces in India which are safe from gender induced aggressions translates literally into an absolute lack of freedom of movement for women. This is an undeniable reality that women in Indian towns and cities have to contend with on a daily basis; to the extent that it has been normalised in the Indian women's psyche as something that is a natural part of being a woman. As such, few women question this status quo and men who are innocent of participating in such violence remain completely unaware of the disabling, direly disempowering consequences of this reality on the mental and physical health of women in India.

> I was returning from an evening movie show with a friend one night, and we were sitting at a bus stop waiting for the 10.40 PM bus to take us back to our university campus. A trio of possibly inebriated men walked past us. The tallest of the group stopped, turned and stared at me for a long moment. His mouth pulled back into a condescending sneer, and he said, (in Tamil)

"Did you forget the rest of your pants at home?" I was wearing knee-length shorts and a baggy t-shirt – rather unfashionable attire, to be honest. I stared at him in shock, at his impudence, my surprise and lack of Tamil skills preventing me from coming up with a response (Ghosh, 2016, p. para.1).

(6.3) FIGURE - 161

Blank Noise (2016) Jasmeen Patheja. *I NEVER ASK FOR IT* [Community Interactive Installation]. Courtesy of Jasmeen Patheja and *Blank Noise*. Retrieved from: https://www.thebetterindia.com/67337/blank-noise-jasmeen-patheja-bengaluru-women-india/i-never-ask-for-it/

6.3.1 JASMEEN PATHEJA

As an illustration of the premise of an active and vigorous, ongoing contemporary artistic practice in India, with an aim to provoke awareness and change, the *Blank Noise* project initiated by Jasmeen Patheja, from the *Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology* in Bangalore, is a fine example. According to Ampat V. Varghese, academic dean of the School, the project originated from Patheja´s personal experience with the repugnant occurrence of *eve-teasing,* rampant in Indian cities. (Varghese, n.d). "Eve-teasing is the male harassment of a woman in public–verbally, physically, or both–a form of taunting with varying degrees of seriousness" (Rajan, 2002, p. 46).

Not surprisingly, what Patheja found most disturbing about the problem of eve-teasing, was the resigned acceptance and apparent silence that shrouded the matter. As such, in August 2003, she set up a public art project with the intention of bringing people face to face with the occurrence, thus challenging the passive attitudes of both women and men to such humiliation and invasion of privacy and liberty of movement; that was the status quo hitherto. "*Role Reversal*, The project is a fluid experiment in getting women to assert themselves in public spaces" (Gupta, 2005, p. para. 1).

Gupta goes on to state that Role Reversal was part of the larger Bank Noise project, which had started a couple of years earlier and was initiated by the artist

with the aim of creating a public testimony of street harassment by victims. Jasmeen Patheja set up the undertaking by organizing workshops involving public participation, and installations. People were invited to hand in the clothes that they had been wearing at the time of their abuse.[153]

(6.3) FIGURE - 162

Blank Noise (Ongoing) Jasmeen Patheja. *I NEVER ASK FOR IT* [Community Interactive Installation]. *Bring The Garment You Wore When You Experienced Sexual Harassment: I Never Ask For It*. Kolkata Courtesy of Jasmeen Patheja and *Blank Noise*. Retrieved from: http://www.blanknoise.org/events/2018/1/2/bring-the-garment-you-wore-when-you-experienced-sexual-harassment-i-never-ask-for-it#

[153] See: http://www.blanknoise.org/ineveraskforit

In the Role Reversal edition of the project, the artist and collaborators sent out invitations in the form of text messages and phone calls, thus creating a network with which to propagate their message which read, "One Night Stand: public participatory performance to reclaim the streets" (Gupta, 2005, p. para. 3). The participants in the performance stood at a zebra crossing with traffic lights, wearing letters positioned to read, "Y R U LOOKING AT ME?" (Gupta, 2005). While other participants brandished placards outlining laws against street molestation.[154] Since its beginning, the Blank Noise movement has extended to cities all over India, through diverse acts which make public statements denouncing gender violence using group performance and other media.

The essence of this ongoing endeavour is to generate open dialogue as a means of triggering change on the subject of sexual molestation in public spaces, such as in streets, parks, on public transport and other similar spaces. So far, the project has successfully raised awareness and created debate around a subject that was previously taboo, completely cloaked in shame, fear, guilt and worse of all silence.

[154] For more on this ongoing project, visit: http://blog.blanknoise.org/

(6.3) FIGURE - 163

Blank Noise (2005) Jasmeen Patheja. *Y R U LOOKING AT ME.* [Community Performance]. Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, (Courtesy of Jasmeen Patheja and *Blank Noise*. Retrieved from: http://www.blanknoise.org/why-are-you-looking-at-me

To quote Jasmeen Patheja herself about how she first embarked on this initiative:

> Blank Noise was initiated in 2003. One of the earliest responses I received was: 'Why talk about 'eve-teasing'? 'Why not something more serious'?
>
> I arrived in Bangalore at the age of 18 to study fine art. Over time I realized that I moved through the city hyper-alert, cautious, with a clenched fist, a 'don't come near me' attitude. My friends would only go out in groups, or with a male friend. If they went out they knew exactly where they were going, how they were going, what they were going to wear and most importantly how they were getting back home, what they were carrying in their bags as weapons of defence (pepper spray, safety pins, chilli powder) and yet these everyday decisions were never discussed. The issue of fear

experienced by women in public spaces was never seen as an issue. It was always just ‘eve-teasing’, something to be dismissed as trivial. [...]
I remember sharing this incident with friends at college and the responses ranged from:

” It happens, ignore it.”

“How come it happens only to you?”

“What were you wearing? Be more careful!”

Another incident, another day, walking in my neighbourhood and a cyclist spat over me. It was humiliating. I remember throwing away those clothes. I couldn’t understand what I had done to be at the receiving end of this irrational, sudden attack, and I couldn’t understand how people around me weren’t recognizing this as an issue. I was aware that women in varying degrees feared public spaces but were not talking about it.

There was a need to form a collective that would address the issue of street sexual harassment. Blank Noise was created when I was in my final year at art school (Srishti School of Art Design and Technology) with a group of 9 students who were willing to go through a process that would involve them,

> their personal accounts and testimonials. As an art student I was deeply interested and motivated by art practice that could work with communities that could exist in public, that could heal, provoke, question. I was interested in work that could be built via participation, that could be a dialogue or collaboration (Patheja, 2010, pp. para. 4-8).

The women and men who participate in the various projects created by Blank Noise are called "Action Heroes." Through their action of prompting collective responsibility and shifts in attitudes, both women and men work to dispel with the fear and shame based relationships that women in India traditionally have with their neighbourhoods, towns and cities; by actively challenging the instigators of the actions that have provoked those relationship and the negative connotations that they hold. The volunteers who become actively involved as agents create a local network within which to raise awareness through dialogue, campaigns, events, etc. in an effort to create a real change in perceptions, consciousness, and behaviour towards women.

As mentioned previously the collective action has been taken up in cities all over India and is addressing amongst other things, the notion that women on the receiving end of such harassment have *asked for it,* through their dress code or body language, attitude etc. The project strives to involve the population as a whole, getting as many people as possible actively involved and taking collective responsibility for the safety of all. The ultimate goal of the endeavour is to create

public spaces which are free of the risk of molestation; spaces which allow for freedom of movement equally for men and for women.

In September, 2008, Blank Noise was invited to participate in an international show which appraised public art practice, in the *Bronx Museum of Art* in New York. "Jasmeen Patheja and her collective, Blank Noise Project, turn the public spaces of New Delhi into settings for charged political encounters on the issue of violence against women" (Cotter, 2008, p. para. 17). So far the results of Jasmeen Patheja's collaborative, fluid, performance art project can be summed up quite succinctly in her own words:

> In 2003 'eve teasing' was rarely written about or discussed. It was passed off as that which is normal, which happens every day, which is merely 'teasing'. Today street sexual harassment and the safety of women is being discussed as one of the most important issues in the country. There are more and more people speaking about it (Patheja, 2010, p. para. 23).

As we have seen, Jasmeen Patheja started her work as a student at the *Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology* in Bengaluru (Bangalore), the capital of Karnataka, South India. "I was a student of fine art and interested in feminist art practice, community and public art. I was also part of a year long [sic] lab at Srishti focussing on the role of the communicator, artist and designer in facilitating social transformation" (Patheja, as cited in Acharjee, 2015, para. 3). As we have seen, Patheja the move to Bangalore for her studies from her

hometown in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 1999, brought with it a growing awareness of the ever present threat of harassment in public spaces.

> When I spoke up about it I was confronted with both silence and denial around sexual violence back in 2003. Feeling unsafe was a given and most of my friends worked around it and made everyday decisions accordingly. For example, they went out in groups or didn't talk about harrassment [sic] even if it happened to them. The casual acceptance of sexual assault and the silence that surrounded was infuriating and I wanted to do something to bring attention to it (Patheja, as cited in Acharjee, 2015, para. 3).

Patheja founded the Blank Noise endeavour during her final year in Srishti. It started as a space within which to raise awareness, break the silence and combat the fear of speaking up against gender violence in public spaces.

> I wanted to address sexual violence as a collective issue, that which citizens and individuals step up to tackling sexual and gender based violence. Our efforts were to be volunteer - led, so that the ownership of every project is collective, […]. I love photography and art and I wanted to find ways in which the two of them could be used to transform society and harmful stereotypes (Patheja, as cited in Acharjee, 2015, para. 4).

Patheja's first project under Blank Noise was called Talk To Me (TTM). TTM became a simultaneous movement with more than one hundred volunteer

participants in three major cities of India; Delhi, Calcutta and Bangalore. As mentioned earlier, participants are known as 'Action Heroes'. Patheja states that TTM sought to eliminate the barriers and distances between strangers on the premise that anonymity lent itself to the creation of dangerous environments that had high propensities of harbouring abusive and violent action. Patheja's argument is based on an understanding that breaking down the distance between strangers allows for empathy and respect towards each other; the fact of being a stranger is transformed into another state with less distance. TTM was the first in a series of campaigns aimed at eliminating fear and danger by bridging the distance between strangers.

The above is perhaps a questionable premise. One would hope to be part of a society which is able to inspire sufficient respect and empathy for everyone, no matter whether they are strangers or our near and dear. However, Patheja's idea was a starting point; TTM became quite a successful endeavour which has to date gathered volunteers from all over India. Added to this, Acharjee states that there are currently Blank Noise volunteer bases in sixteen different countries representing 58 cities and towns all over the world, (Acharjee, 2015). Patheja uses these words to describe the TTM experience.

> It was aimed to breakdown both the stereotype of a stranger and a public street at the same time. The project called to attend to discomfort and question our misinformed biases. Action Heroes had to find something in common with a complete stranger. We fear the unknown. A conversation

> has the potential to create familiarity and real 'knowing'. This creates empathy and respect. […] Preparing for Talk To Me was a tacit process and a challenging one. The Action Heroes had to arrive at a place of willingness and agency to be at one side of the table. The challenges faced by me as a facilitator were different from the journey of the participants.[…] Our volunteers come from different backgrounds, age groups, gender and sexualty [sic] and have been instrumental in building public discourse on sexual violence through a range of campaigns and projects designed across media (video, audio, live action, performance, posters). Projects are designed to shift the fear-based relationship that women have been taught to have with their cities. The collective creates a safe space for survivors to be heard, and is built entirely on the lived experiences of its Action Heroes, (Patheja, as cited in Acharjee, 2015, para. 7-8)

TTM was in fact an original endeavour in India that could be classified as a performance which reached international scopes. At present, according to Patheja, Blank Noise has volunteers from 16 countries including Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Hong Kong and Japan, encompassing almost 58 towns and cities worldwide; (as cited in Acharjee, 2015).

Walking down the streets of towns and cities in India, one will perceive an uneasy sensation, the source of which, most likely, might initially prove difficult to identify. However, on further observation, one will notice that the unnatural

perception and discomfort stems from the fact that the mentioned streets are populated by numerous groups of seemingly ideal men; gathered together on every corner, aimlessly chatting while they sleazily gawk and comment on every female passer-by. This is an occurrence that is practically inexistent in any other major world metropole. However, in Indian cities it is an example of abnormal, highly abusive and unacceptable male chauvinist behaviour that has been normalised, accepted and integrated into the average person's psyche; and even more specifically the Indian woman´s psyche, as natural masculine behaviour; meant to be ignored but tolerated and expected.

In 2005, Blank Noise invited volunteer women Action heroines in various cities of India to replicate the idle loitering practised by men on a regular basis around the cities. The aim was to draw attention to the anti-social, unnatural aspects of such behaviour as well as to address the fear and exposure that women are forced to endure whenever they are required to use or be present in public spaces. Around about the same time, a blog was set up where people from anywhere could share experiences of gender based violence that they had endured or witnessed. This provided a way for people to express traumatic experiences on a subject which more often than not is highly taboo, and where the victim generally suffers the brunt of blame and humiliation.

> We were interested in learning what would happen to both the participating 'Action Heroes' and to the street itself to suddenly experience idle women.[…] We wanted to build safe ways for people to speak about their

> experiences of sexual violence. We wanted to build a space that would not judge or question the survivor. Our blog has become a place for speaking, listening in, and building collective insight (Patheja, as cited in Acharjee, 2015; para. 9-10).

Several projects in the same vein have followed; amongst them the *Safe City Pledge* and *I Never Ask For It*. All of these endeavours involve the collective efforts of Action Heroes who are made up of volunteers from the general public, often on an international scale. All the projects aim at provoking situations that raise awareness while simultaneously generating room for active questioning of the abusive, unsafe and victim blaming status quo that is prevalent in public spaces all over India.[155]

[155] Visit: http://www.blanknoise.org/home ; http://blog.blanknoise.org/ ; http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42408844 for further details of past and current Blank Noise projects and endeavours.

6.3.2 ROSHNEE DESAI AND SANKET AVLANI

Can design make a change or start a conversation? This is the question that multimedia artist / graphic designer, Roshnee Desai, set out to address when she started her pioneering projects which, in her own words, (as cited in Shani, 2018, para. 15) tell "the story of the Indian girl in different ways" (Shani, 2018, p. para.15). Roshnee Desai is a young artist from the privileged, urban elite in Mumbai. Daughter of a family of doctors, she has travelled far and wide and has benefited from studying with some of the best designers and most influential minds in both India and the west. She began her career when she was still very young, after winning a radio competition while still in the early phases of her studies. This gave her the opportunity to host her own episode in a radio show, from writing the script to broadcasting. As she puts it, "that's when I realised you can make a career (and money!) from [sic] media and the creative arts" (Design Fabric, 2017, p. para.3).

The theme of Roshnee Desai's creative ventures revolves around the lives of women in the city of Mumbai. As Esha Chhabra states, Mumbai is

> the heart of India's corporate sector, headquarters to the country's biggest finance firms and home to the Hindi film industry. The city's liberal lifestyle encourages young women to be independent, partake in nightlife, and travel freely. Yet they still deal with men's ogling, unsolicited gestures

> and catcalling. […] As a graphic designer and visual artist, Desai is keen on infusing digital art with real-world issues. "It's about educating and engaging men as much as it is about women," she says. "It's not one or other (Chhabra, 2017, pp. para.3-4).

In line with this quest, Roshnee Desai's first project with a clearly feminist overture draws attention to the lack of freedom and authority for women within public and private urban spaces in India; an issue we have already touched upon with the study of Jasmeen Patheja' s artistic endeavours. Roshnee Desai's first project was created in the format of an experimental mixed media film called *Cover Up*. *Cover Up* was part of Desai's end of course final project while studying at the London College of Communication. A two and a half minute film that combines animated drawings, photoshoots and the haunting tones of a woman narrator, the film is dark and authentic; a poignant reflection of the tense and claustrophobic inner voices, the anxious thoughts, the suffocating feelings that drown and inevitably torment women, not only in public spaces in the large Indian metropoles but often within the walls of their own homes too. "You are a 27 year old independent Indian woman sneaking into your own house" (Desai, Cover Up, 2015, pp. min.1:42-1:47). The film portrays a woman passenger in what seems to be the back seat of a taxi. "Cover Up is an experimental mixed media film, exploring the different ways to express the subconscious of a medium, a city and a character. It is a [sic] story of a woman traveling at 3 am in the city of Bombay

told through her subconscious" (Desai, 2015, p. para.1). Cover up coincides curiously in the form of a signal of what was to be Roshnee Desai's second major project, her collaboration with *Taxi Fabric*.

Cover Up won Roshnee Desai various awards, amongst them the Best Woman Director from *Women in Film and Television* (WIT), "the leading organisation recognising women working in creative media in the UK and worldwide" (Townsend, 2016, p. para.4), and the *People's Choice Prize* in the Short Film Festival of the UN consulate in Mumbai, (Desai, 2015). *United Nation's Women* (UN Women) made use of the film in the 2017 annual, sixteen days of activism against gender-based violence campaign, celebrated from November 25th to December 10th. The 2017 overarching campaign was titled, *Leave No One Behind: End Violence against Women and Girls* (UN Women , 2017, p. para.2). Desai's film is a poignant and subtle narrative, portraying the kind of disempowering violence overlooked by both society and the law; but one which women in many societies have to contend with as a routine part of their day to day life.

In April 2015, Sanket Avlani, a young graphic designer, launched an innovative and inspiring start-up called *Taxi Fabric* (Routh, 2016). *Taxi Fabric*, quite literally turns taxis into showcases of art and design. Taxis in Indian cities are an iconic part of the city landscape and identity. However, taxis in India have never been particularly strong in terms of design and aesthetics. In fact, as can be read on the taxi fabric website, "The designs that cover the taxi seats are often

dull and forgettable. […] design in India has always had limited scope and impact. It has never been widely recognised in India, as a medium of communication and social good" (Taxi Fabric, 2015, p. para.1). Avlani decided to change this by converting taxi seating upholsteries into a support where designers and artists can showcase their work, thus successfully spreading their message to thousands of people daily while at the same time enhancing "the everyday travel experience of thousands of locals. This platform has made contemporary design available to everyone" (Taxi Fabric, 2015, p. para.1).

Sanket Avlani was born in London, but his parents moved back to India when he was still very young. Like Roshnee Desai, Avlani also spent some time in London after graduating from university. There he gained experience working for various advertising and design enterprises, thus learning how to work with people as well as acquiring other crucial, good business practices. Avlani saw taxis as the link to a "mass communication medium […] putting art in the public space, like a taxi, can exist as a story telling medium; I think a lot of these social issues that exist today in India and even in Mumbai continue to exist because of lack of communication" (Avlani, 2016, pp. min.0:26-1:06). As the *Great Big Story* website states, these are "Fabrics Fighting for Change" (2016, p. min.0:28) .

Anyone who has been to Mumbai knows that it is indeed a fast and chaotic city where there is no time to pause, As Avlani states, everyone is on a journey and taxis are the major circulatory system used by people to reach their destinations. "At Taxi Fabric we decided that we would work with designers who

sort of invested their time in coming up with design solutions for social good" (Avlani, 2016, pp. min.1:0 8-1:15). Through *Taxi Fabric*, Avlani has effectively found a way in which to spark a conversation amongst people.

> In a bustling city of millions, […] that's how one graphic designer is approaching social change in Mumbai: by targeting taxis. He and a team of local artists are reupholstering taxis and rickshaws with social messaging about everything from women's rights to treatment of the deaf and mute (2016, p. para. 1).

Sanket Avlani was initially quite unprepared for the widespread positive reception that Taxi Fabric inspired from both drivers and passengers. "We deeply underestimated the reaction we would get from drivers and passengers. Taxi Fabric started out on a whim because I wanted to fuel my desire for design in a public space" (as cited in Pande, 2018, para. 8); (Pande, 2018, p. para. 8). Initially the taxi drivers were happy to upholster their cars as they received new upholstery free of charge, however they were soon to see some significant changes in their experiences on the journey and with the passengers they carried. The taxis carry labels which show details of the story behind each design as well as the information on the designer / artist of the fabric; thus offering passengers the

possibility of getting in touch with the creator of the fabric, should they so wish to.[156]

> Drivers told us about how people started conversations with them over the design. It led to more engagement between passenger and designer and more than being just a conversation starter, it delighted people. And that's what design is all about, really. With Taxi Fabric we've brought design to people, instead of them having to go seek it out (as cited in Pande, 2018, para. 8).

Taxi Fabric has now expanded into printing their designs on other transport vehicles, such as rickshaws. It has also taken off in other Indian cities apart from Mumbai. It is currently experimenting with a wider variety of textile supports such as bed linens and clothing, apart from taxi upholstery; so as to reach an even bigger audience. The endeavour apparently participated in the London 2016 Design Fair from September 22-25. It also plans to host workshops where design students will be offered the opportunity to experiment with the designing of fabrics for change, in this way furthering the concept of designing towards objectives which include far reaching social impact (Pande, 2018).

[156] For more detail, please visit: http://www.taxifabric.org/aboutus/

In 2016, the British Rock band, Coldplay released the official music video for their song *Hymn for the weekend*; featuring interiors of Sanket Alani's taxis in numerous scenes of the video. The video also features Beyoncé, as a rather unlikely, blond haired Indian *diva* or goddess for worshippers; taking the viewer on a an uncomfortably romanticised and colourful journey through the streets of Mumbai, Varanasi and other Indian cities. Although the video does not attempt to portray the authentic Indian reality, it does in its particularly stylised fashion show the celebratory mood and colours that typically accompany popular Hindu festivals like *Holi* and *Diwali*. According to Avlani, the video put Taxi Fabric on the "global map" (2017, pp. min. 0:10-0:13).

By June 2017, Taxi Fabric had supplied over 150 taxis with a new upholstery makeover (AskMen India, 2017). Taxi Fabric has now diversified into Design Fabric, as a production line that is not limited to fabric, but can also use the design and prints on items like stationary and home decoration. Avlani aims to bring together the creations of culturally aware artists and designers, in order to create designs that have a social impact. "We have no doubts about the effect art and design can have on these people" (2017, pp. min. 2:30-2:33). As Benu Joshi Routh puts it, "Sanket Avlani has designed a creative platform to take art to the masses […] in a city with great divides between the haves and have nots, inclusivity is the most important subject for design and Avlani has sought to address it (Routh, 2016, p. para. 1 & 4).

Roshnee Desai collaborated with Taxi Fabric for her work – which as we have seen previously addresses the issue of authority, liberty and empowerment for women in public spaces – by designing a Taxi Fabric titled, *Social Good Only For Men.* The objective, in this case was to make "men think about how women are treated in Mumbai. Encouraging them to be more sensitive towards a woman's freedom" (Narayandas, 2015, p. para.1). In her design for Taxi Fabric, Desai aimed to create a design that would create awareness of what Narayandas calls the "invisible rules" (Narayandas, 2015, p. para.1) which women have to live by in Mumbai and other towns and cities of India. Desai states that the inspiration for her Taxi Fabric design *Only For Men* came from observing the typically marginalizing and classist attitudes towards weaker or supposedly inferior members of Indian societies; the discriminatory treatment that is often meted out to the less privileged sectors of the population, including women (as cited in Narayandas, 2015).

Desai draws attention to the uniquely patriarchal characteristic of the Indian public transport systems, which reserve separate seating areas and train wagons specifically and exclusively for women and children passengers, on the premise that they are in need of protection when travelling. The instigators of this system do not seem at any time to question the implications as regards the imbedded issues of a society that openly recognises that their very own men folk constitute a real threat to their women and children, specifically when they are travelling alone or are in public areas. These separate seating areas in buses and the specific train

wagons carry a symbol which indicates that the space or compartment is reserved only for women travellers, or *'Ladies Only'*, as they often like to say in India. As Desai states, "why do we need that kind of privilege?" (2016, pp. min. 00:17-00:20); (Townsend, 2015, p. para.16)

Roshnee Desai drew inspiration for her Taxi Fabric project from the sign showing an image of a woman's head that can be found on the train wagons and bus areas that are reserved for them. The signs show a woman's face, her head puritanically covered as she looks out at the observer with a shyly coy smile. This is the ideal of a perfect Indian woman, promoted by the patriarchal powers of culture and society. She is a woman of very fair complexion; – hardly representative of the majority of women in the Indian subcontinent – her head is covered as a symbol of her purity, helplessness and innocence. Her smile indicates her all-consuming willingness to please and fulfil her expected womanly duties, in exchange for the much needed patriarchal protection – in the form of a husband – believed by many to be the all exclusive aspiration and only real desire and ambition of the '*good Indian woman'*.

Desai decided to take the 'Only for Women' sign used on the Indian public transport system and use it on her Taxi Fabric design, converting the sign into an 'Only for Men' image. The original sign found in Mumbai is in Marathi, the state language of Maharashtra where Mumbai is located. It states "Fakt Striyansaathi"; which means "Only for women" (Narayandas, 2015, p. para.3). Desai took the original image of a woman's head and face and converted it into that of the head

and shoulders of a man. She labelled her Taxi Fabric, "Only for men", or "Fakt Purushansathi" (Narayandas, 2015, p. para.3).[157] Roshnee Desai asserts that being confronted with this kind of design "will make the men of Mumbai think of how they treat their women and encourage them to be more sensitive towards their freedom" (as cited in Narayandas, 2015, para. 4).

Roshnee Desai's taxi fabric creates the kind of atmosphere inside a taxi that, to some extent, allows men to experience the sort of challenge that travelling or being in public spaces can mean for women. Desai converts the face of the woman found on the public transport system into a man with ogling, lecherous eyes. The whole interior of the taxi, door panels included, are covered in eyes that seem to be staring lecherously alongside leering tongues. Meanwhile, on the ceiling of the taxi we find a chart outlining the rules by which a 'good Indian woman' lives; but in this case the roles are reversed. "Do not wear sleeveless clothes; do not reveal your undergarments; be home by 7 o'clock; do not spread your legs whilst sitting. In Hindi and Marathi, the chart asks: do these rules apply to men?" (Townsend, 2015, p. para. 15). See: (6.3) FIGURE - 164 and (6.3) FIGURE - 165

[157] See: https://cargocollective.com/roshnee/The-Mens-Only-Taxi-for-Taxi-Fabric-2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDFCWcZO-Ig

(6.3) FIGURE - 164

Roshnee Desai, (2015). *The Mens' Only Taxi for Taxi Fabric*. Courtesy of Roshnee Desai. Retrieved from: https://cargocollective.com/roshnee/The-Mens-Only-Taxi-for-Taxi-Fabric-2015

Desai does seem to have managed to cause quite a stir while also creating a conversation with her taxi fabric design. In Roshnee Desai's own words,

> The minute you see that a man has to follow those rules, even to a woman, it seems really ridiculous and funny. It makes you chuckle! Every time I talk to the [taxi] driver, he says, people are totally getting the message and say, this is not a joke, it's actually a very serious conversation, (as cited in Townsend, 2015, para. 23).

Clearly, Roshnee Desai is amongst a generation of young artists whose art has a clear activist agenda and is successfully generating a direly needed conversation while raising awareness in one of India's busiest and most modern cities. According to Esha Chhabra,

> Even in India's most modern city, women must still navigate an oppressive set of taboos. The unwritten rules make them cautious of their movements and their attire, restrict their behaviour and infect their thinking.
>
> Roshnee Desai's visual art challenges those social norms. Her works — short films, cartoons and even the upholstery in a Mumbai taxicab — all seek to get people thinking and talking about women's rights and social issues (Chhabra, 2017, p. para.1).

Desai continues to contribute through her designs to discourses and narratives aimed at starting conversations, raising awareness and drawing attention to women's rights issues, taboos and culturally endorsed abuse and discrimination. In 2017 she set up *LOCAL*, a design firm aimed at taking design out and "amongst the people, public" (Desai, as cited in Chhabra, Nov. 2017. para. 6). On the LOCAL website we find BLUSH which presents us with a web comic called '*LEDISLOG*' (Log meaning people, the script is in Hindi).

(6.3) FIGURE - 165

Great Big Story, (2016). *How Art is Changing India's Biggest City*. Roshnee Desai explaining Taxi Fabric. Courtesy of Great Big Story and Roshnee Desai. Retrieved from: https://cargocollective.com/roshnee/The-Mens-Only-Taxi-for-Taxi-Fabric-2015

Ledis Log which means the 'women-folk' in Hindi-English slang, is an attempt to unravel the deep-rooted trials and tribulations that urban Indian women face.

It is a satire about the Indian city girl who is stuck between the residues of strange traditional norms and modernity.

In a world where feminism has become a serious scary topic, this project attempts to have a humorous take on it (LEDIS LOG, 2017, p. Para.1).

6.3.3 PRIYA'S SHAKTI

In December 2012, the New York based filmmaker and publisher Ram Devineni, was in Delhi. Ram Devineni is the founder of *Rattapallax*, a literary organization with a focus on issues surrounding globalization through literature, poetry and film. "Our goals are to create international dialogue using literature & cinema and focus on what is relevant to our society" (Rattapallax). Devineni won the 2015 Grand Jury Sundance film festival prize for his film The Russian woodpecker (Rattapallax, p. para.3). His visit to Delhi coincided with the infamous and brutal gang rape on a moving bus – mentioned earlier in this study – that drew unprecedented outcry, demonstrations and media attention; both within India and worldwide. Devineni joined voices with the rest of the population, to denounce the occurrence while also lamenting the absolute lack of interest and compromise demonstrated by both government authorities and the police force, at all levels. The indifference of authorities and impunity of perpetrators of crimes against women and girls has historically been the standard attitude and practice in India; even more so when dealing with rape, domestic and gender violence cases. (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Devineni recounts that during the protests, while speaking to a Delhi police officer, he was appalled to hear the officer repeatedly state, "no good girl walks home alone at night" (Devineni, 2015, pp. min. 1:17-1:26). In other words, as

Devineni affirms, the officer was clearly putting the blame for the horrific incidents that had taken place that evening of December 12th 2016, on the victim. He was quite definitely suggesting that it was the victim's own fault and of her own doing; she had called this upon herself (Rehman, 2015). We will remember that Jyoti Singh Pandey – thereafter known as *Nirbhaya*, as in fearless – died 13 days after the attack in a hospital in Singapore, as a result of the injuries she sustained.

It was this conversation that seemingly served as the propeller for Devineni's interactive, multimedia comic book, *Priya's Shakti.*

> I knew then that the problem of sexual violence in India was not a legal issue; rather it was a cultural problem. A cultural shift had to happen; especially views towards the role of women in modern society. Deep-rooted patriarchal views needed to be challenged (Devineni, as cited in Rehman, 2015, para. 3).

Devineni spent the following year travelling round India and Southeast Asia. He met and liaised closely with poets, activists, philosophers and socialists who were involved with non-governmental organisations working to combat gender based violence and discrimination. He also spoke to rape survivors. It became clearer and clearer that the most difficult issue in the fight against gender violence did not lie in the actual laws, which are in place to a certain extent, – current legislation is undoubtedly in urgent need of review as it falls severely

short when addressing issues of rape and gender violence – but in the attitudes of people and society regarding the issue. "They all kept telling me that they were not having legal problems getting justice, rather their friends, their community and even the cops were discouraging them from pursuing justice. The shame was put on them" (Devineni, 2015, pp. min. 1:47-1:57). Victims of gender abuse and rape often find themselves ostracised and threatened, more especially so after reporting the crime. As such, the blame and burden of shame for rape and other gender violence is culturally and historically placed on the victim; while the perpetrators of such acts enjoy a culture of impunity, feeling empowered and at liberty to continue repeating their crimes.

Devineni recounts in his TED Talk the horrific ordeal of a gang rape victim he interviewed. Having been threatened by her rapists that they would make public a video recording of the occurrences, should she report the crime, she lived with the secret of what she had endured for years; only picking up enough courage to report the crime after there was a repetition on another girl, perpetrated by the same gang of men. As a result of her report, her family received repeated death threats, and suffered endless ostracizing and shame; resulting in her father committing suicide. Several years later, she is still being guarded by a police officer who wields a machine gun, due to the continued danger of a mortal attack in revenge for going public. As Devineni affirms, "Knowing that this is what […] justice equals, well there is no incentive to pursue justice" (Devineni, 2015, pp. min.3:23-3:25).

As a child Devineni was an avid reader of the highly popular *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, (Devineni, as cited in Sutra Journal, 2015), (Sutra Journal, 2015). Amar Chitra Katha comics offer a highly patriarchal take on Hindu mythology, and are undoubtedly amongst the widest read comic books amongst middle and upper class Indian children, both in India and in the diaspora. A brief analysis of the narrative trend to be found in the Amar Chitra Katha series will be carried out further ahead in this chapter.

As Devineni declares, like many children of the Indian diaspora, his parents moved to the United States when he was a young child. They would go back to India during the summers to spend time with the family. While in India, during the long summer months Devineni

> discovered the great mythological stories. I selected the comic book format because I grew up reading Amar Chitra Katha comic books and was hugely influenced by them. I think millions of children have read the series, and they've entered the collective consciousness of contemporary Indian culture. Often, I first learned about Hindu mythology through their comic book series. Also, comics are an important part of our culture, and hugely popular with teenagers and young adults (Devineni, as cited in Sutra Journal, 2015, para. 4).

As stated previously, after the *Nirbhaya* rape in 2012, Devineni witnessed in person the absolute apathy amongst wide sectors of the population as well as

the police and authorities in India, towards issues of gender violence, misogyny and patriarchal attitudes and abuse. The realization of a need to confront this generalised apathy, and push for changes in attitudes, specifically at a cultural and social level, helped sow the seeds for *Priya's Shakti.* Devineni recounts initially considering the option of creating a documentary, especially as he is mainly a documentary filmmaker. However, looking back to his childhood and recollecting the influence and popularity amongst children and youngsters of the Amar Chitra Katha comics, he concluded that a comic book format would indeed be the most effective way of reaching the youth and children who are the adults of tomorrow. He also felt that the *Nirbhaya* case was far too delicate and recent at the time; a documentary film might have comprised the real risk of creating more focus on the sensational aspect of the case, leaving in secondary place the focus on educating mind-sets, which in fact is the true intent behind the project, (Shah J. , 2015).

In *Priya's Shakti,* Devineni uses the traditional Hindu mythological stories which usually involve humans and disciples invoking the gods for help during episodes of crisis on earth, as a base for his story. In *Priya's Shakti,* a young villager, Priya, turns to the goddess Parvati for *Shakti* after she is raped and outcast by her family and village. "In the Hindu mythos, the concept of Shakti, or strength, is seen as intimately connected to the divine feminine energy of the cosmos" (Pande & Nadkarni, 2016, p. para.38). Parvati hears her cry and descends to earth incarnating herself into Priya's mind and body. The story unfolds as it would in Indian mythological tales; initially with unfair

consequences for Priya which in turn unleash the wrath of Lord Shiva, resulting in a destructive dual between humans and the astral figures, and ending only when the goddess Kali intervenes.

Kali, the strongest aspect of Shakti, represents divine rage in Hinduism. Parvati finds Priya still hiding in the forest where she had sought refuge when banished from her village after the rape. Parvati tells Priya that she has been given the mission of spreading a message of change using the *mantra* – a sacred Hindu chant – "Speak without shame, and stand with me … bring about the change we want to see" (Pande & Nadkarni, 2016, p. 38). This gives Priya the strength to return to her village astride a tiger she had tamed, and spread her message of change.

Priya's Shakti has for the most part been applauded and received both in India and internationally with praise and acclaim as a genuine and true attempt to address and resolve entrenched cultural attitudes of patriarchal misogyny, as well as the current culture of impunity for crimes against women that prevails. The multimedia, interactive, augmented reality, comic book format is particularly suited to maximise meaningful engagement with the younger populations; an indispensable requirement, if attitudes and mind sets are to be truly redefined and altered. According to the Asia Literary Agency, *Priya's Shakti* has broken

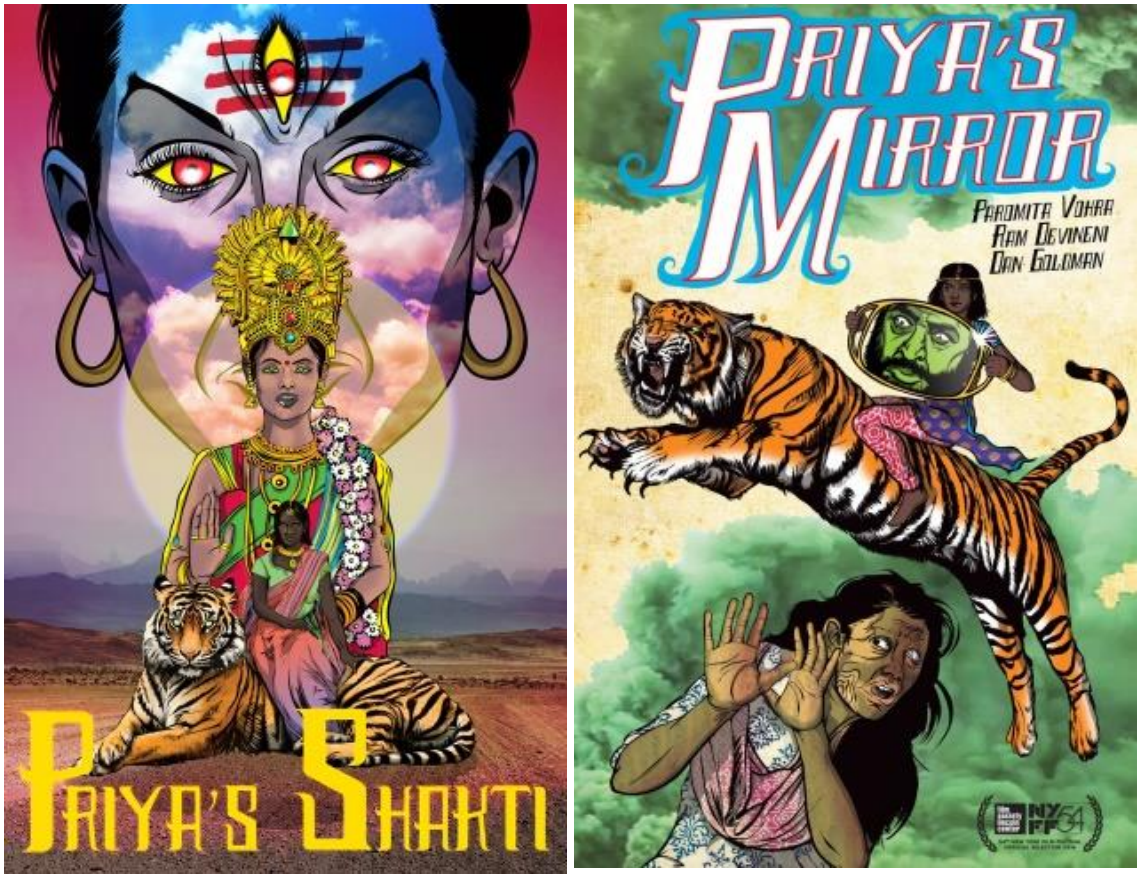
grounds, receiving numerous awards and positive reviews as well as a highly positive reception both within and outside India, (2018).[158]

"The exhibition, which is a first of its kind, displays artwork through augmented reality technology" (Shah J. , 2015, p. para.2). It was presented and displayed simultaneously as an innovative, augmented reality show in numerous places including Manhattan's *City Lore Gallery, Scuola Holden–Storytelling* and *Performing Arts* (Torino, Italy), *DocsBarcelona Festival* (Barcelona, Spain), *TEDx Talk* (London, U.K.), *Sheffield Documentary Festival* (U.K.), *Cooler Lumpur Festival* (Malaysia), and *Civita di Bagnoregio* (Rome), (Shah J. , 2015). *Priya's Shakti* has also received comprehensive press coverage from major news channels and papers around the world, including *BBC News*, *The Guardian*, *Aljazeera*, *France24*, *El Pais*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Diario Vasco* and *Reuters Foundation*, amongst many others, (Priyas Shakti, 2014).

Priya's Shakti has been followed by *Priya's Mirror*, which uses similar Hindu mythological and cultural values to specifically address crimes of acid attacks. Real life victims are portrayed and featured as heroines who are empowered with strength and super powers, healing and helping gain justice for themselves and other victims; thus, raising awareness while addressing the

[158] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HfRnr-urvw

customary patriarchal attitudes and generalised impunity of instigators of acid attacks. See: (6.3) FIGURE - 166.



(6.3) FIGURE - 166

The Comic versions of *Priya's Shakti* and *Priya's Mirror.* Based on the classic *Amar Chitra Katha* comics.

Courtesy of Ram Devineni.
Retrieved from: https://m.comixology.eu/Priyas-Shakti-1/digital-comic/161799

Undoubtedly, *Priya's Shakti* as well as its sequels are novel and quite possibly, somewhat effective approaches in creating an impetus for raising social awareness and the changes in mind-sets that are so necessary for Indian societies. However, it is also safe to state that Devineni has failed to portray and represent the diverse and extremely varied religious, caste, class, and cultural realities of Indian societies; thus raising also the problematic question of whether the *Priya's Shakti* and related projects might not in fact be contributing towards the reinforcement of Hindu nationalist ideology as well as creating dangerous constructions of rape as spectacle and sensation. A simple analysis of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic series on which the structure of the *Priya's Shakti* and related stories' project has been built; (Devineni, as cited in Sutra Journal, 2015, para. 4), is enough to raise disturbing questions regarding the premise and ideology of Devineni's project.

6.3.4 PRIYA'S SHAKTI: A MODERN AMAR CHITRA KATHA

Amar Chitra Katha was the first series of comic books to appear in India and is unarguably still amongst the most widely read and beloved comic book of generations of middle class Indian children within the country and the global Indian diaspora. "Founded by Anant Pai in 1967, it is also an important cultural institution that has helped to define, for several generations of readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian" (McLain, 2012, p. para. 1). As stated earlier, the series features Hindu gods and goddesses in stories based on classical Hindu mythology. In the later series, post 1970s, political personalities from the medieval period as well as from relatively recent Indian history also began to be featured. These included personalities such as warriors and kings like Shivaji and Akbar, as well as freedom fighters from the modern era like Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi.

Anant Pai, at the time a junior executive for the *Times of India* was inspired to create what he considered to be a necessary educational comic series based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata scriptures, having watched a TV quiz show where Indian children apparently demonstrated little or no knowledge of basic Hinduism. As such, Pai partnered with the publisher India Book House, to design his interpretation of what he considered a pedagogical comic book series that portrayed and recounted children friendly versions of stories based on Hindu representations of Indian religion and history. The comics went on to gain

inordinate popularity and success, becoming a household name by the 1970s. They have since then sold over 100 million copies of more than 440 titles which make up the complete series (Amin, 2017); (McLain, 2012).

Amin asserts that Anant Pai not only revolutionised religious education, but also children's entertainment. The Amar Chitra Katha comic series were the first to be published of Indian origin and they opened a pathway for the development of a wider domestic market leading to series like Diamond Comics and Raj comics. Despite competition, Amar Chitra Katha have continued to be amongst the most widely read, popular and beloved reading material amongst children both in India and the diaspora; consequently, they have "also helped supply impressionable generations of middle-class children a vision of "immortal" Indian identity wedded to prejudiced norms" (Amin, 2017, p. para. 3).

As Amin points out, the Amar Chitra Katha production team was led by Anant Pai as the chief story teller. Pai and his alongside his writing and illustrative team

> […] constructed a legendary past for India by tying masculinity, Hinduism, fair skin, and high caste to authority, excellence, and virtue. […] his comics often erased non-Hindu subjects from India's historic and religious fabric. Consequently, ACK reinforced many of the most problematic tenets of Hindu nationalism—tenets that partially drive the platform of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, currently under fire domestically and

> internationally for policies and rhetoric targeting religious minorities and lower castes (Amin, 2017, p. para. 3).

The comics are adored and devoured by millions of children, and are often their only window into a culture that is wholly alien. These are Indian children of the diaspora who speak only English and have had little or no true contact with India. Amin's personal experience with the Amar Chitra Katha series reflects the reality experienced by most of these influential young minds settled outside India.

> The heroes of ACK became my superheroes long before I discovered Spider-Man or the Flash. […] I didn't care that the protagonists I was reading about were drawn with white skin. I was unaware of the broader, ongoing effort by Hindu nationalists to define a doctrine devaluing lower castes, women, tribal populations, and religious minorities. I didn't understand how ideals of obedience to authority—something the comics taught—can feed systemic inequality. I was just reading about heroes who made me feel stronger than I was, and who would teach me, I believed, how to be Indian (Amin, 2017, p. para. 5).

As would be clear from simply a cursory examination of the series, the histories in the comics construct battle scenes and social situations where virtuous Hindu warriors, gods and kings, fight and overcome evil beings and rulers, including amongst these as scourge are impinging Muslims as well as cruel and arrogant British imperialists See: (6.3) FIGURE - 167 A & B

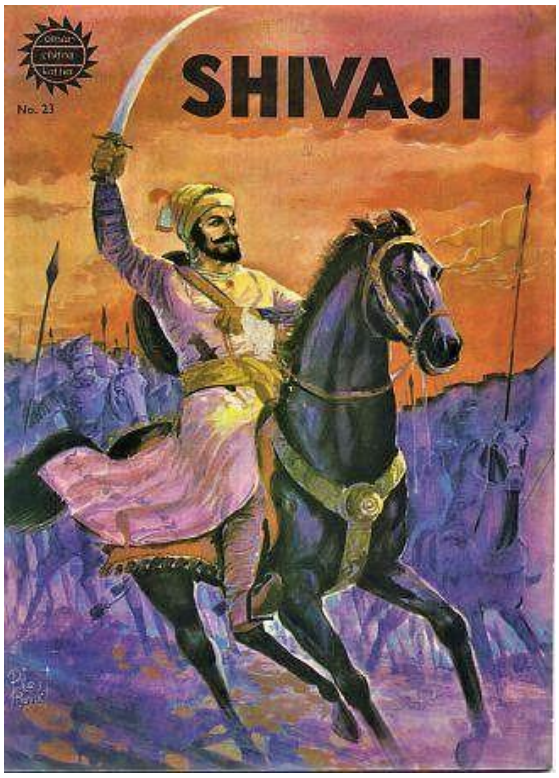
Thus the narrative constructed by the series is "a limited and tonally consistent India sanitized through a distinctively Hindu lens" (Amin, 2017, p. para. 6). The content of the comics largely erases or weaves in dramatically negative light all religious minorities including Christians and Sikhs. They are completely absent within its portrayal of the historical heroes who make up its extensive collection of the *Makers of Modern India*. Muslims are often portrayed as villains who threaten the brave Hindus. Additionally, the beauty constructs upheld by the series are openly regressive; fair skinned women and muscular male characters make up the virtuous heroes and heroines, while demons and ruthless assassins are painted in the darkest of browns and black. Krishna, Rama and other canonically dark-skinned gods and personalities are portrayed in blue tones. To quote Amin once more, "[…] In Indian culture, where dark skin is frequently associated with lower castes, colorism fuels casteism (Amin, 2017, p. para. 10).

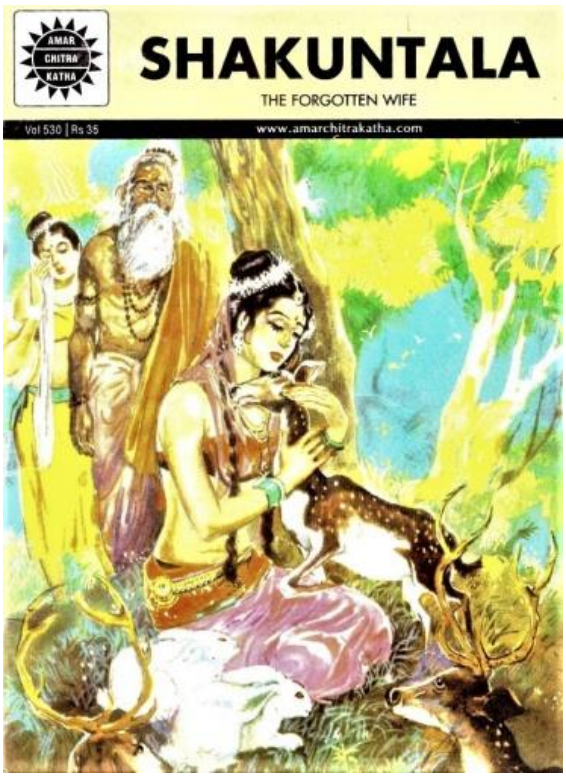
Furthermore, within the Amar Chitra Katha series we are hit with the presence of dangerous subliminal messages that promote philosophies of absolute self-sacrifice and deference to authority; irrespective of reason or cause. These figures of authority are largely represented by masculine, high caste Hindus who are indiscriminately promoted as righteous and superior. Sacrifice is glorified and expected from women, including goddesses and members of the lower castes or tribes. Hence, the Amar Chitra Katha series clearly set up women, tribes, religious

and other minorities as active participants and collaborators in their own oppression. See: FIGURE 168.

> […] even goddesses cheerfully demonstrate unselfish subordination of their own selves and service to their husband. Men receive virginal wives as gifts from other men—or heroically kidnap them. At their most shocking, some ACK comics venerate women's suicide as a means to inspire or defy men. Many heroines choose sati, a long-banned practice in which widows like Padmini and Ranak Devi burn alive on funeral pyres (Amin, 2017, p. para. 12).

Just like the Amar Chitra Katha comics, *Priya's Shakti* offers a standard graphic novel narrative experience and is available directly from the website without any charge. Additionally, the pages can be scanned with a free smart phone app called Blippar. This provides an augmented reality experience that includes videos and testimonies from real victims. The *Priya's Shakti* web site claims to seek to provide "an innovative social impact multimedia project that helps illuminate attitudes towards violence against women in India" (as cited in Pande and Nadkarni, 2016. p. 37). The site also states that the philosophy of the project focuses on the goddess Parvati, giving form to a mortal devotee, Priya, who is a victim of rape and abuse.





(6.3) FIGURE - 167 A & B

A – *Shivaji* (1982). B. R. Bhagwat. Edited by Anant Pai; Illustrated by Pratap Mulick. Courtesy of India Book House Education Trust, Bombay.
Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Picture Stories), series, No. 23 Retrieved from: https://www.publishinghistory.com/amar-chitra-katha.html

B – *Shakuntala The forgotten wife.* (Volume 530). Retrieved from: https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3050 (Chandra N. , 2010)

This representation supposedly reawakens the ancient matriarchal traditions of Hinduism, which, according to the project's creators, have been eroded by modern interpretations and representations of Hindu culture. *Priya's Shakti* claims to be achieving the lofty goal of creating "an alternative narrative and voice against GBV [Gender-Based Violence] in popular culture through the Hindu mythological canon. Through its message, this project can reach wide audiences in

India and around the world—anywhere GBV is an issue" (as cited in Pande and Nadkarni, 2016. p. 37).

Unfortunately, this somewhat simplistic approach, however honourable, to an infinitely complex social reality, within an equally complex demography, as is to be found in India, fails to take into consideration timeless evidence that the matriarchal traditions of Hinduism have never served as a deterrent for gender based violence. The contrary is often the case, as for example, in the practice of Devadasi for the goddess Yellamma; examined earlier in this study. The supposedly effective interventions aimed at both a national and international public, alongside the creation of a discourse about gender based violence in India, through the lens of Hinduism, essentially, effectively and dangerously conceptualize Indian as Hindu.

The practice of Hinduism varies significantly from community, region and cast, both in India and other countries where offshoots of the religion have sprouted over centuries. The version of Hinduism offered through *Priya's Shakti* is a sanitised and standardised narrative that has been promoted since the British colonial rule which was "codified in part, at the behest of the East India Company in the early colonial period, by upper-caste Brahmins" (Chakravarti, 2003, as cited in Pande and Nadkarni, 2016. p. 38). Romila Thapar asserts that the process of streamlining pluralistic religious practises was given impetus and seen as necessary by the Colonial powers as well as Cristian missionaries who considered polytheistic religions as being primitive and resistant to central authority (Thapar,

1989). Thapar asserts that this phenomenon was further exasperated by scholarship positions of the period that accentuated fitting religious theology into a whole that led to the artificial privileging as religious authority of the standardised narratives created by upper cast Brahmins.

Thomas Blom Hansen points out that this standardised narrative of Hinduism has been propagated repeatedly since the colonial era, leading to the forced naturalization of the superiority of the upper casts as well as the out casting of other religious practices as non-Indian. Thus, the artificial privileging discourse has effectively served to successfully form an understanding of Hindu nationalism that erroneously positions and defines India as practically exclusively a Hindu nation, (Hansen, 1999). This distortional prism calls for urgent discussions regarding the marginalization of Hindu and other religious practises that fall outside the established standardised version of Hinduism; bearing in mind that the modern Indian state and her politicians take great pride in their claim of secularism and democracy.

Within the same discourse that purports to treat all its citizens as equal, regardless of cast, creed or religion, we also perceive the unmistakable claim and functioning of primacy by Hindu right wing forces that are convinced of their supremacy, based on the aforementioned discourse and texts. As *Priya's Shakti* attempts to address the issue of gender violence using the same sanitised, Brahmin supremacy rhetoric of Hinduism, it clearly also serves as an agency that further expands the problematic status of alternative practices, while propagating the

extremely erroneous notion that this in exclusion makes up the modern nation state of India. As Pande and Nadkarni state,

> For instance, in one panel, Priya's act of returning to the village and beginning her campaign is connected to other events deemed to be significant in order to formulate the image of an "ideal" Indian woman. The events blend the mythological (the story of Savitri) the historical (the contribution of women to the Independence movement), and the contemporary (the Gulabi gang). The juxtaposition of all these events in a single panel has the effect of creating a false sense of historicity, a rhetorical flourish that reproduces the machinations of Hindu nationalism (Pande & Nadkarni, 2016, p. 38).

Priya's Shakti uses the same singular premise as the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. It combines Hindu supremacy mythology, history and cotemporary realities to centre Hindu Nationalism and communalism, thus quite consciously propagating pro-Brahminist ideologies upheld with anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit messages. It would seem that this rendering has not been the result of an unconscious error or unawareness. Quite the contrary; disguising the underlying messages of sanitised Hinduism, *Priya's Shakti* makes a perfunctory effort to break away from the established standards of beauty for Indian women. These we should note are dictated by the aspiration to maximum fairness of skin colour as a symbol of upper class and cast identity. Priya is portrayed as dark-skinned, unlike

the *Amar Chitra Katha* heroines who are always rendered fair as Snow-white, combating villains who are almost always dark as night.

Priya's Shakti fails in many other aspects to fulfil its claimed objective as true awareness raising activism. As presented earlier in this study, Shakti as a concept of divine feminine strength and power in Hinduism cuts across all class and cast affiliations. The concept of Shakti as a force from which women draw strength is found all across society, including theatre and popular culture, such as in Bollywood cinema productions. As examined earlier in this study, Shakti as feminine force is present in all versions of goddess, manifesting itself at its strongest and most independent state in the forms of the goddesses Durga and Kali. The goddess Parvati however, represents an aspect of Shakti that like Sita embodies the ideal wife in charge of ensuring the harmonious domestic space of home.

Priya's Shakti identifies Parvati, the wife of Shiva, this status being the height of Parvati's importance, as the goddess who responds to Priya's prayer by coming to her rescue. It is questionable as to why Ram Devineni made Parvati, the ideal wife version of Shakti as his choice for the main goddess who aids Priya, instead of Durga or Kali, who function without bowing to male authority. Although *Durga* and *Kali* are present in the story, their roles are notably in secondary context. Thus, *Priya's Shakti*, once again acts as rhetoric that maintains the established narrow Hindu concept of appropriate and divine feminine qualities to be acquired by the ideal wife. The story also diverts very

quickly from the behaviour and actions of the supposed main figure of Parvati onto Shiva's rage. Pande and Nadkarni point out that

> It is ironic that a text supposedly about female aspects of divine power devotes most of its narrative to the effects of male rage. While the intent of this shift may have been to show the destructive nature of patriarchal structures, the female goddesses are, in effect, once more relegated to the margins (in this case, literally to the margins of the comic's page). Thirdly, even when Parvati takes the form of Kali (the most fearsome aspect of Shakti), it is only to stop Shiva, which once more frames her actions as responses to his. When seen in the context of previously discussed societal processes in which Hindu middle-class women are conscripted into embodying ideal womanhood, this framing becomes more intelligible as a reification of Hindu nationalism (Pande & Nadkarni, 2016, p. 40).

Finally, the *Priya's Shakti* website proclaims to offer an alternative narrative and feminist voice aimed at a wide range of audiences both within India and abroad. There is no doubt about the vast press coverage that has been offered to the site both nationally and internationally. However, although the site affirms its accessibility as a freely available comic and augmented reality technology, the fact of the matter is that the outreach though these formats and technologies is limited to educated members of the middle and upper classes of India and foreigners. Considering that the vast majority of the masses of ordinary people do

not have access to smart phones or similar devices *Priya's Shakti* fails to achieve much of the outreach or impact that it proclaims to have. Additionally, although there have been workshops that can be seen through the embedded content of the involvement of project through a mural painting of Priya on her tiger in a few locations, including some slum neighbourhoods, it still fails to show any true interaction. One can observe people passing by and observing curiously the process of installation of the paintings, however there does not seem to be any explanation offered as to what the project is about nor any opinions sought from the people passing by. There are few or no recordings of the comic or its artwork being displayed in public spaces within India, the vast majority of the displays being made in special exhibition venues and galleries around the world.

> Indeed, the only public space named specifically is Dharavi. This specificity, then, is suspect as it locates the artwork within a particular notion of the "real India" and as a specularization of poverty that does not go beyond a surface engagement. This specularization is also linked to the marketing of such locales to wealthy foreign (mainly white) tourists as an opportunity for "slum tourism," especially following the popularity of the Oscar-winning film, Slumdog Millionaire (2008) (Pande & Nadkarni, 2016, p. 40) .

Furthermore, the vast media coverage demonstrated with links to articles in more than three hundred news pieces, thus proving its global impact are

disappointing on detailed examination. Browsing the articles one realizes that the story has been presented simply as a graphic novel presenting a rape survivor as a super heroine. However, the comic focuses most of its content on Parvati using all her energy and talent to placate her husband Shiva's male rage; thus simply reinforcing the traditional patriarchal narrative structures seen in the Amar Chitra Katha series. In an oral presentation offered in the XIX *ISA World Congress of Sociology* in Toronto on July 18, 2018, Ayesha Vemuri and Sailaja Krishnamurti further elaborate on the narrative offered by *Priya's Shakti*, stating that in fact it actually

> […] undermines Priya's agency by representing her 'superpowers' as mediated by the gods. This raises questions about what model of social change the comic's creators envision, and about the underlying message of the comic as a whole to its readers. Reading Priya's Shakti through an analysis of the transnational discourses about religion, popular culture, and sexual violence that surround it, we discuss the ways in which this comic actually reiterates rather than opposes tropes about the passivity of Indian women and the dangers of brown men, and plays into nationalist claims about Hinduism's dominance in India (Vemuri & Krishnamurti, 2018, p. para. 2).

CONCLUSION

> Art, freedom and creativity will change society faster than politics.
>
> Victor Pinchuk

INDIA AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS, AN UNCERTAIN GLORY – (JEAN DRÈZE & AMARTYA SEN)

An outline of responses to the primary questions of this study, as listed at the beginning of this thesis is given at the end of this conclusion.

However, before outlining my responses, I would like to finalize this study with a few general statements regarding developments in India over the last few years, and a brief reference to the *TRANS/HEARTS, SAHODARI FOUNDATION;* in acknowledgement of what was an unquestionably serendipitous presentation by Dr Regiane Ramos Correa of the *University of Mato Grasso do Sul*, in Brazil, at the AEEII international conference held at the *Universidad de Valladolid*, Spain, on November 28th 2019. The conference marked the occasion of 150 years since Gandhi's birth. Regiane introduced me to the invaluable work being carried out

by Kalki Subramaniamand through her organisation *TRAN**S**/**HE**ARTS* and the *Sahodari Foundation*. Kalki Subramaniamand, an empowered transgender woman from Pollachi in Tamilnadu, – one of the 28 Indian states, its capital is Chennai, previously Madras, situated in the farthest southeast part of India – founded the *Sahodari foundation* in 2008.

The foundation, made up of volunteers and young transgender people, aims to, amongst numerous issues, defend and influence in the establishment of legal rights and recognition, education, socio-political, economic and overall welfare of the underprivileged, specifically in the trans-community. TRANS/HEARTS, established in association with artist Hariparthan Sambandam, is an art workshop programme through which transgender identifying people in diverse communities are able to get together, learn to create art and express their life experiences and "journeys of self-discovery" (2007) through art. Workshops have been held in cities across south India. Since June 2017, art works from workshops have been exhibited in diverse shows. Proceeds from sales go entirely to the artists in question.

One of the latest shows, *Ask them to **Shut Up**! because the voiceless need to speak!* was held at the British Council centre in Chennai, from March 29 to April 14, 2019. It also formed part of a short film screening, *#FivefilmsForFreedom*, and brought together the work of transgender people from across the country, who,

through their art creations related their often heart wrenching stories and experiences, (2007).[159] The workshops and related events are clearly therapeutic; they not only serve to discover the creative talents of the people involved, but unquestionably provide a healing and cathartic experience of empowerment, emotional growth and wellbeing for the often wounded members of the community.

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen have referred quite succinctly to India's unprecedented post-independence growth as an 'uncertain glory' (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Certainly, India's achievements have been unquestionably impressive. In the last decade India has been the "second fastest-growing large economy in the world" (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 1). India as a BRICS nation alongside Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa, is recognised worldwide as an exemplary triumph in

> […] pioneering democratic governance in the non-Western world […] as is its basic success in maintaining a secular state, despite the challenges arising from its thoroughly multi-religious population and the hugely problematic history of violence around the ending days of the *Raj* (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 1).

[159] For more on the TRANS/HEART project see: https://transhearts.org/news/
https://www.facebook.com/transhearts/
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTmZLyG4RFs

In recent years there has been significant commotion within politics and society in India. This in turn has been accompanied by outspoken dialogue and discourse regarding a wide range of policies, corruption, administrative flaws, economic triumphs, as well as gender violence. Issues that were traditionally relegated to the back bench have been brought to the forefront of debate and discussions, enabled by "a vibrant media and robust democratic institutions" (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. vii). This has led to, what is clearly healthy and vitally important attention being focused on these matters. However, it would seem that the discussion is compromised by a prevailing partiality that encompasses mostly the comparatively advantaged upper and middle classes, leaving behind the vast majority of the population. As Drèze and Sen assert, the focus is mainly on the

> lives and concerns of the relatively privileged, including not only the very privileged but also others who are not right at the top but are certainly much more privileged – in affluence, education, health care, cultural opportunities and social standing – than the bulk of the Indian people. The issues that affect the lives, and even survival, of those who have been left behind tend to receive remarkably little attention (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. vii).

As far as gender issues are concerned, violence against women has dominated the political agenda and media, specifically after the public outcry and

demonstrations following the *Nirbhaya* gang rape case of December 2012, treated earlier in this study. The tragic case of Jyoti Singh Pandey has served also to bring into focus the numerous issues of gender discrimination and violence prevalent in Indian society. These include, amongst other issues, the callously unscrupulous police attitude towards victims who report sexual crimes. However, equally notable is the fact that, as Drèze and Sen have pointed out, the media attention and outcry came after a vicious crime that involved a medical or physiotherapy student; as such, the middle classes were able to easily relate to and identify with the victim (Drèze & Sen, 2013). .

On the other hand, there have been and continue to occur horrendous crimes of similar magnitudes involving poverty ridden areas and downtrodden girl children and women of the Dalit communities, crimes which have not received any significant attention in mainstream media and even when there have been reports, victims are often blamed and the crimes have not been met with a similar public outcry in India; until perhaps extremely recently.[160] Evidence of poor or little progress in attitudes as regards violence against women, despite evident economic growth and progress in other sectors of the country is made evident, for example, by a comprehensive article in the 23rd December 2019 edition of *TIME* magazine

[160] See: Human Rights Watch Report: https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/08/everyone-blames-me/barriers-justice-and-support-services-sexual-assault-survivors

by Rachael Bunyan and Sanya Mansoor.[161] The article makes reference to demonstrations against violence and rape cases with convictions which have included lawmakers, politicians and academics. The article highlights the problem of unreported cases due to fear of police persecution where the forces themselves become perpetrators of crime; as well as the stigma surrounding sexual crimes, where often the victim is blamed or accused of being of *loose or lax* morals, as if such a definition makes for justification.

The *Nirbhaya* case marked a turning point of more or less continued attention on sexual crimes, particularly when involving lower and higher middle class girls and women. A more open dialogue on sexual violence forced the government to take legislative action in 2013. "A cultural silence was broken. It was a moment in time where it seemed that India was breaking the cultural taboo of speaking about sexual violence," (Bajoria, *Human Rights Watch* researcher, as cited in Bunyan & Mansoor, 2019, para. 12). Public pressure resulted in the enactment of laws by the Congress Party as well as reforms that included guidelines for better treatment of victims by the healthcare system, and the

[161] see: https://time.com/5754565/india-rape-new-delhi-bus-attack/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=the-brief&utm_content=20191227&xid=newsletter-brief&fbclid=IwAR1uRY52WSa4ug_YuTkl_7nH0GvCVCMW4oPqZJ54UD2GeISHVOmLgq6r2iU

establishment of the *Nirbhaya Fund* to provide state funding for programmes aimed at improving safety and attending to victims of violence (Bunyan & Mansoor, 2019).

Unfortunately, records and activists testify that reforms are "poorly implemented and enforced. 'I always say: we have pretty strict laws. What we need is surety of punishment [rather] than stricter punishment,'" (Bajoria, as cited in Bunyan & Mansoor, 2019, para. 19). Less than 20% of the *Nirbhaya fund* has been drawn and although medical staff receive training on the care of victims of sexual crimes, there appears to be a highly prejudiced attitude that results in callous treatment from not believing the victims. According to women's rights activist and *Secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association*, Kavita Krishnan, trials and court rooms are also highly antagonistic settings where women face degradation and interrogation that often calls into question their sexual life and morality (Krishnan, as cited in Bunyan & Mansoor, 2019).

> From 2016-2017, the number of reported cases of rape reached 32,559 according to government statistics, but experts agree that far more occur than are reported. That number also does not take into account attempted rapes. "Rape statistics in India must be taken with a large carton of salt because they don't tell the whole story," (Krishnan, as cited in Bunyan & Mansoor, 2019, para.7).

In 2017, Raya Sarkar, a law student published on Facebook a list of names of alleged sexual molesters in academia, leading to a vigorous Indian *MeToo*

movement which encouraged many more women to come out and share their own experiences of such incidents. However, it would appear that more information of the issue has paradoxically led to a worsening of the situation. As Bunyan and Mansoor cite

> "It has become much more difficult for feminist voices to be heard this time around," Krishnan says of her attempts to speak up about violence against women. She has received daily rape and death threats since 2014, during the election campaign of now Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose BJP party has been accused of protecting its own lawmakers accused of sexual misconduct.
>
> "Seven years ago I could protest against the government and the supporters of the government were not threatening me with rape and death. Now they are," Krishnan says. "This is a very real and present danger. That is the picture of India today. It's a terrifying situation." […]
>
> "These are all very toxic masculine governments. For them, women's rights, violence against women is not a priority at all. Forget about priority. There is insensitivity at large," says Kumari. "They may have come to power… screaming at the top of their voice that they will do something about safety for women but when you look at what they rolled out it's absolutely not enough."
>
> "As long as these men are sitting in power nothing will happen," she adds. (Bunyan & Mansoor, 2019, p. para. 13; 25).

The situation outlined above invariably forces one to question how much of the old issues have actually been resolved and in particular, how much real empowerment has there been as far as women are concerned, especially amongst the masses of women outside the privileged sectors of society. Undoubtedly, following two hundred years of colonial rule and practically complete economic stagnation, India managed to swing into democratic government with effective and viable results. Additionally, although, like in many countries, Indian democracy is far from wholly complete or perfect, over sixty years of reasonably successful democratic governance justifies its status as a leading democratic country or the *world's largest democracy* – as most Indians take pride in saying.

Even more significantly, India has managed to prove the merit and wealth to be found in the context of richness in diversity, demonstrating "quite powerfully how democracy can flourish despite a multitude of languages, religions and ethnicities. […] taking everything together, there are good reasons for seeing a major accomplishment in the broad success of secular democracy in India" (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 3). A significant success of Indian democracy – until perhaps very recently – [162] is also to be seen in the number of leaders of

[162] See: https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2018.1535035

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/world/asia/modi-india-elections.html

(continuación de la nota al pie)

democratic politics who are from disadvantaged sectors of the population including women, certain religious minorities and lower castes, (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

Social progress in India has not been without merit either. Since 1951, literacy amongst women has gone from 9 to 65 percent, life expectancy has risen from 32 years in 1951 to approximately 66 years and infant mortality has decreased to 44 per one thousand live births from approximately 180 in 1951 (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Within these figures, the state of Kerala is exemplary and exceptional with high levels of female literacy at 92% and low infant mortality. According to the 2011 census, Kerala also boasts 1058 females to 1000 males, clearly breaking with the national average of 933 women to 1000 men, (Susuman, Lougue, & Battala, 2014); the obvious consequence of the practice of selective abortion, poor post-natal care of female infants as well as poor nutrition and neglect of girl babies and children.

Unfortunately, the fact remains that there continues to exist an enormous abyss between 'the haves and have nots', huge divisions and inequalities making Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's (1891-1956)[163] dream of a socially and politically

http://theconversation.com/despite-political-setbacks-in-india-dalit-voices-grow-stronger-117055

[163] B. R. Ambedkar was born into the untouchable *Mahar* caste. He was a major player in negotiating India's independence and had significant differences with Mohandas Gandhi.

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egalitarian India, still a long way away. As such there is the need to persist in the pursuit, and maintain faith and confidence in the power to "educate, agitate and organise" (B. R. Ambedkar). Arguably one of the biggest stumbling blocks towards this end is the lack of sufficient involvement by the media and other organisations with the 'other halves of India'. (2015).

A simple example of the enormous divide in media attention can be demonstrated in the coverage of the electrical blackout of over twelve hours suffered by 600 million people between 30 and 31 July 2012. The power cut was hugely covered both in India and world-wide, as it plunged twenty of the twenty eight state of India into black chaos. A fact that did not hit the headlines is that from the 600 million people affected, over 200 million had never actually had any electricity in the first place. As Drèze and Sen assert regarding the particular situation in India:

As the principle architect and Chairman of the drafting Committee of the Indian constitution and Minister of Law and Justice between 1947 and 1951, he was a staunch defender of Dalit rights. He is broadly acknowledged to be the Father of the Indian Constitution. See also: The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste: The Debate Between B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi. https://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/the-doctor-and-the-saint/article5740369.ece

> What is remarkable is not the media's interest in growth rates, but its near-silence about the fact that the growth process is so biased, making the country look more and more like islands of California in a sea of sub-Saharan Africa (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. ix).

As is to be expected in these circumstances, the situation for women in India is equally disparate. Drèze and Sen succinctly highlight that

> given the extent and form of gender disparity in India, there is an urgent need to focus not only on what can be done for Indian women (important as it is), but also on what India women can do for India – helping to make it a very different country (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. xi).

Evidence of contradictory standpoints concerning the status of women in India today and prospects for the future abound. Indicators of entrenched patriarchal concepts regarding women remain unchanged alongside also highly progressive tendencies and standpoints. The socio-cultural situation for Indian women remains highly complex encompassing both the modern and the old traditions. A 2013, *Ministry for Women and Child Development Committee mandate research report* by the Indian government documents that in 2015

> On one hand a liberalised economy has offered better education, jobs, decision making powers and opportunities for women. On the other, women have been targets of a strong backlash with increased violence in and

> outside the home, acute wage differentials and discrimination and continuing commodification in society (2015, p. 3).[164]

As we have seen in this study, women and feminist artists in India have to a larger or lesser extent participated in the struggle to raise awareness, using their work not only to denounce gender discrimination, but also, in some cases, joining forces with their less fortunate compatriots to improve and empower both at an individual level as well as including entire groups of women and communities. As Eva Fernández del Campo has pointed out, in one of the few studies of Indian art to be realized originally in Spanish academia and language, many young women artists in India are critically analysing women´s roles and positions in society from alternative perspectives. Perspectives which vary and divert from traditional views connected to protective motherhood and destructutive goddesses. Eva Fernández del Campo highlights how these artists seek to renegotiate womanhood and women´s sexuality through work which is often "autobiographical" leading to the creation of collective memory (Fernández del Campo, 2013, p. 427).

There are currently many practising artists involved in diverse endeavours whose work I have not presented in detail, due to lack of space within this study. However, within this conclusion a brief sampling of a few ongoing efforts

[164] See full report at:

https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Executive%20Summary_HLC_0.pdf

pertinent to the topic at hand is by all means well deserved. These introductions might also serve for further research into an extensive and diverse, highly enriching and increasingly large practice by women artists in India who continue to create waves both within the national and international art scene.

Nilima Sheikh (1945) is based in Baroda; she received her MFA from the *Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda* in 1971. Within her practice, she has engaged extensively with traditional artists, their histories and art forms from Northern India, expressing not only her interest in the art techniques, but also her concern for the sustainability of the artists and their productions. Her work has been included in major shows both in India and abroad, including for example, *Documenta 14* in Kassel in 2017 (Mogali, 2015).

Nilima Sheikh offers us one of her most renowned and poignant pieces, in the series *When Champa Grew Up (1984),* mentioned briefly earlier in this study. See: (5) FIGURE - 111 and (5) FIGURE - 112 and (5) FIGURE - 113. The piece, made up of a series of 12 paintings in tempera, denounces domestic violence, through the story of young Champa, a happy child before her marriage. Sheikh states:

> ‘When Champa Grew Up’ was a very definite decision to work on a subject that had become a very pressing problem in our society: the brutalisation and torture of very young brides to extort more money from their families, often leading to murder. It was a phenomenon called dowry deaths. It was a time when a lot of information about it was coming out in the national

> press. It might have been rampant prior to that, but there had not been enough awareness. When I decided it was necessary for me to work on the topic, I was unsure how to do it. I needed to find the right language. It is one thing to want to work on something and another to find the language to say it, because you don't want to make what you're saying banal and trivialise the issue. You have to find the right way of talking about it. In that sense, the feminisation of my language has in some way contributed to my feminist ideas (Sheikh & Chan, 2018, p. para. 22).

Anita Dube (1958) also finished her MFA at the *Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda* in 1982. She creates conceptual pieces from photographs, videos mixed media sculpture, installation and performances that are politically informed with questions that "redefine art's role in everyday public life" (Dube & Mopidevi, 2018, p. para.3). As curator of the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Dube consciously sought to create an inclusive show under the heading, *Possibilities for a Non-Alienated Life*. As Chanpreet Khurana states, "from feminism to consumerism, Dube's art delves into some of the most pressing issues of our times" (Khurana, 2018, p. para. 3). Anita Dube states that the Biennale was the first of its kind:

> I think this may be the first large-scale biennale exhibition, perhaps even internationally, to feature more women and queer artists than men. To me,

> this is a symbolic gesture, in response to a long tradition of exclusion in the arts, and in cultural narratives (Dube, as cited in Khurana, 2018, para. 17).

Anita Dube's *Silence (Blood Wedding)*, which she created in 1997, brings together thirteen sculptures of actual human bone armatures covered in red velvet sequins and lace embroidery evoking female lingerie. The pieces are housed in transparent methacrylate containers. The effect of these pieces on the onlooker is unquestionably disturbing. One is confronted with poignant combinations of delicate beauty created from macabre material, much of which is highly taboo to Hinduism. The pieces seem also to clearly allude to the "fragmented body" (Fernández del Campo, 2013, p. 427). The use of such contradictory elements juxtapositioned and evocative of life, death, physical pain, the wedding night and sexual pleasure, leave a haunting and ominous dread of what might be expected between husband and wife, far removed from the expected *happily ever after*.[165]

Rekha Rodwittiya (1958), another alumnus of the *Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda* and the *Royal College of Art*, London wears the badge of 'feminist' proudly. In discussing her upcoming show celebrating 60 years of feminist artistic practice in which the focus was women, she declares,

[165] See also: https://thevcs.org/gomer-and-hosea/you-will-call-me-my-husband

> I have lived my life by a strict adherence to feminist ideals since I was 18 years old, and till date, this remains the most vital core of my existence, it makes the feminist space the very DNA of my existence. […] The female figure as a central image is not accidental, nor arrived at, by chance in my work. […] It is consciously placed as an endorsement of female victory - almost as a totemic trophy of the self for the self - to reinforce the embodiment of the female spirit as a vital axis to life itself. The unflinching gaze and the frontal posture demand that the viewer is obliged to participate and engage with her presence; yet, the figure remains untouched by outward censure (as cited in Mohta, 2018, para. 1-2)

Clearly, Rekha Rodwittiya's work has been informed by issues concerning women from the very beginning. In discussing an upcoming show, she outlines the source of her work as finding its inspiration

> […] from the many stories about the courage of ordinary women, both rural and urban, that have championed women's rights in the subcontinent, I have found my strength. It is the culmination of these myriad experiences lived through six decades that makes up *Transient Worlds of Belonging*. It reflects the world that I live in and which becomes my personal territory that I call my world of belonging, (Rodwittiya, as cited in Ayaz, 2018, para. 5); (Ayaz, 2018).

Ironically, amongst the most successful and advantaged women artists there are also many who still refuse to acknowledge the issues facing a large percentage of Indian women. They prefer instead to turn a blind eye, bury their heads in the sand, or simply rely on dismissive comments, and discourse alluding to Hindu religious concepts of *Shakti* or similar, as a means of renouncing responsibility to any sort of proactive action.

As an example, one might cite Anjolie Ela Menon (1940), alumnus of the *University of Delhi* and the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Paris; she is a contemporary of Nalini Malani – examined in detail earlier in this study – and Nilima Sheikh. Anjolie Ela Menon proudly boasts an emphatically contradictory standpoint from the latter two and the artists examined briefly above. Menon is without question one of India's most celebrated and award winning artists. A house hold name amongst those in the Indian art world, Menon is an example of a woman who quite clearly hails from a highly privileged, upper class and caste background. As a woman in India, her advantageous heritage has opened every available door, providing her access to the very best possible opportunities; she has as such benefited from the most elite education and connections possible.

However, although Menon's paintings often portray women in different everyday situations, she categorically states,

> I do not consider myself a feminist because in India we believe in Shakti which is 'Woman Power', whereas feminists in West [sic] try to appropriate male power. There is a subtle difference between the two. I have always felt

totally empowered anyway, I don't need to burn my bra. I also believe in Prakriti/Purusha which is the delicate balance between the male/female principle on which the universe surely rests (Menon A. E., 2017, p. para. 7).

In the following pages the questions and objectives presented at the beginning of this study will be summarised in order to present the findings of this doctoral thesis.

1 - What are the historical foundations and the background of feminism within the socialist and nationalist movements of India, since pre-independence and how has religion influenced in the women's question?

Within Parts 1 and 2 of this study, the picture that emerges is that feminism and rising gender consciousness in India – and this is likely to be partially true within many postcolonial nations – was a direct result of the women's movements that emerged from the early social reform movement and somewhat concurrently with the nationalist movement. The initial concerns amongst the progressive, liberal and educated elite, who were strongly influenced by their reformist educations and ideas, resulted in a movement focused on social reform, which encompassed gender issues, albeit subsumed within an umbrella of diverse social concerns.

As inferred, those baby steps were also the first responses to accusations by the British of a degenerate Indian society unfit for independence. The resulting movements which promoted legislative and political reforms, alongside education and basic rights for women, partly as contestations to colonial accusations, laid the foundations to addressing the women's question in India as well as all future

movements. These movements were also driven to a larger or lesser extent by influences of western feminism.

The pro-independence nationalist movement headed by Mohandas Gandhi played a key role in establishing the acceptability of the presence of women outside their domestic spheres or homes; that is, in the public arena. This permitted and promoted visibility especially for upper and middle class and caste women in public spaces even while maintaining inherently patriarchal social structures and gender roles Nevertheless, the women involved in the nationalist cause were increasingly more educated and prepared, enabling them to continue, as well as promote and lead ensuing waves of women's movements, despite the fact that more often than not these functioned within the constraints of cultural and religious expectations.

Religion in India has continued to maintain a powerful stronghold upon society, culture and politics. As such, despite unquestionable advances and ongoing movements that have resulted in progressive tendencies, there has never been space for absolutely secular positions, polities or policies of reform, no matter the amount of clamour This has, to a large extent, impeded the true elimination of patriarchal structured societal and cultural norms and expectancies.

Also in response to the question just defined, **Part 2** of this thesis focuses extensively on the activism of many of the key players, including many women, of the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. This part delves into their personal lives, their public and political actions as well as their literary

contributions. Their engagements and contributions were fundamental and decisive in the development of progressive legislation and policies concerning education, marriage and family, amongst others. They were also central to the unfortunately resistant, but somewhat growing awareness essential to social and cultural advances. The results of these recognisably feminist engagements are directly linked to the progressive developments, both previous and ongoing, that have driven the diverse factors essential to achieving women's agency and freedoms in India throughout recent history.

2 - How has the history and evolution of feminist practices in India, as represented and seen in rural and modern art, and literature, shaped the women's question, even while not being overtly recognised as feminist in character?

As seen within the response to the previous question, **Parts 2, 3 and 4** of this study offer insights into the immense efforts of intrepid women whose involvement in movements, artistic practices and literary activism, whether wholly recognised as feminist or not, have in some measure manged to challenge centuries of ingrained patriarchal establishments. Represented in this study is what would really amount to a merely minute sample of women whose activism, through their involvement in movements, artistic practices or writing, have effectively deconstructed, questioned and subverted, – to distinct degrees of effectiveness, – the real and metaphorical violence of entrenched patriarchal primacy. This battle in India has until relatively recently been gaining ground

within not only family structures, society, the state and institutions, but also, to some extent, in religion.

I state until relatively recently because the last few years have evidenced a clear counterattack to feminism in India. This is obviously due to a revived marketing and glorification of Hindu religious and cultural traditions within the nationalist political agenda of the current governing party which has increasingly gained following since 1989. Narendra Modi and his *BJP* party gained a historical electoral victory in 2014 which was repeated with a landslide victory in April 2019.

Sadly, the mostly non fructuous results of Indian feminism in disrupting preconceived notions of gender roles and cultural traditions pose no obstacles to BJP's large and extensive disseminating strategy using social and traditional media, amongst others, to promote a renaissance of the *grand Hindu traditional culture*. Unfortunately, this propaganda seems to be gaining ground at a daunting pace, consuming India's majority Hindu population and thereby posing a genuine threat to the secular culture and politics within which feminism and humanist questions have been historically targeted and could continue to be addressed and resolved. However, despite the appalling panorama that currently presents itself, the women whose efforts are presented in this study, as a sample amongst many others, are unquestionable laudable and deserving of acclaim.

3- Keeping in mind the specific location of Indian women of different regions, castes and classes, what are the subversive trends and evolutions brought about by vernacular art production by rural women artists? Within this context, what results do the collaborative experiences between rural, urban and mainstream artists achieve, in combating entrenched religious, social and cultural barriers affecting a large part of the women's population?

A study of the personal lives and body of work of three recognised vernacular artists, the undertakings of some women's organisations alongside the work of promoters of women empowering activities and traditional Indian arts offers insights into this question, specifically in **part 4.**

To answer this question I have examined at length the lives, social backgrounds and trajectories of vernacular artists Ganga Devi, Sita Devi and Sonabai. Additionally, an appraisal into the untiring journeys and efforts of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Pupul Jayakar, Jagdish Swaminathan and Jyotindra Jain, amongst others, offers an understanding of their roles in promoting the traditional arts of India as rich cultural heritages for rural women and their communities, with naturally empowering socio economic and personal characteristics. I have also touched on the work of Ela Bhatt, Founder of SEWA; as well as other organisations such as, *The Barefoot College* and *Bharat Bhavan*, actively involved in promoting development and opportunities. SEWA and the Barefoot College's efforts target specifically rural and marginalised women, often from remote communities.

Ongoing endeavours that have resulted from these origins are to be seen in examples such as the *Mithila Art Institute* (MAI), which was originally set up with funding from the Raymond Owens estate and the *Ethnic Arts Foundation* in the United States. Approximately 25 students a year graduate from MAI which boasts to have amongst its graduates women who have "received national and international recognition and many have been featured in exhibitions books and articles in India, France, South Africa, and the USA. […] the Institute also organizes national and international exhibitions for its graduates and other talented Mithila artists" (2016, p. para. 5).

Similar programs are offered in organisations such as *Sadhna*, established in 1988 with 15 women. *Sadhna* now has 714 members working in 43 different groups distributed in 16 locations of Udaipur in the north western state of Rajasthan. The *Mithilasmita* enterprise in Delhi, founded by former SEWA worker, Samarendra Mishra (1951-2011) and the *Gond Art* embroidery project of the *AhamBhumika* organisation in Bhopal are similar endeavours with a focus on the empowerment, through economic independence, of rural women using vernacular art production. Most of these programs necessarily involve the participation, either as employees or voluntary workers, of younger, educated women, many with formal art qualifications. They collaborate hand in hand with

the rural women and other staff to ensure the smooth functioning and sustainability of the organisations' undertakings.[166]

4 - How are the creative journeys of mainstream, rural and urban artists contributing to advances in women's status through empowerment and progressive sociocultural expectations?

Overlapping in characteristics with the previous question, **Parts 3, 4, 5 and 6** examine the diverse aspects of the work of both vernacular and elite, mainstream artists from distinct perspectives. By studying the lives and works of organisations, as well as a sampling of rural and mainstream artists, a somewhat incomplete picture comes through. A look at Meera Mukherjee's thematic focus on the lives of everyday village women and men, represented through her work visually, as well as in the techniques she employed in her creations, allows for a positive conclusion offering encouraging instances of progressive tendencies. Mukherjee was perhaps amongst the most insistent and successful in her endeavour to "bridge the gap between artist and artisans" (Ghosh, et al., 2018, p. 7). She thus played an important part in positioning at the forefront the debate on the classification of traditional arts within museum practices and contemporary art

[166] See: https://www.sadhna.org/mission/

http://www.mithilasmita.com/

http://ahambhumika.org/embroideryproject

theory and criticism. She also drew attention to the cultural, aesthetic and economic value of the practices and work of indigenous artists around India.

Meera Mukherjee was involved in preserving the *Kantha* embroidery traditions of West Bengal and Odisha, and the carpet weaving traditions of villages in Southern Calcutta. These remain alive as viable livelihoods, albeit through the ongoing efforts of institutions like the *Kala Bhavana* Institute of Fine Arts at the *Visva-Bharati University* in Shantiniketan and the work of Shamlu Dudeja, founder of the *Self Help Organisation*, (SHE). Meera Mukherjee is also known to have worked with women and children in the then recently established *Dhanket Bidyalaya* rural school near Kolkata.[167] She is known to have gone to great lengths to improve educational and employment opportunities for rural or vernacular artists and their children (Ghosh, et al., 2018).

Similarly, Navjot Altaf whose oeuvre has been examined in **Part 5,** spent several years working with local artists in villages such as Bastar in Chhattisgarh, central India. Apart from her own personal artistic journey in collaboration with vernacular artists, Navjot established and developed subtle, but profoundly life changing projects involving the collective action of the villagers. One such project was to install water pumps known as *nalpar*, around which village artists created large decorative walls offering sheltered and private spaces where women

[167] See: http://users.ntplx.net/~vsei/ProjectPics_3_FILT.htm

https://strandofsilk.com/journey-map/west-bengal/kantha-embroidery/history

could gather to bathe, socialize and also to go about their daily chores. Previous to the installation of the water pumps, these women were forced to carry heavy buckets back and forth over long distances, resulting not only in physical musculoskeletal ailments but also in an absolute lack of leisure time, added to the lack of public communal meeting places in which to gather and socialize. Grant Kester asserts that "Navjot and her local collaborators, Shantibai, Rajkumar, and Geesu, have, over a period of years, effectively remapped the psychogeography of this village" (Kester, 2013, p. 122).

Navjot continued her labour with these rural, *Adivasi*[168] communities, resulting in a similar, two way exchange of cultural knowledge and art practice, as Meera Mukherjee had done previously. Following the *nalpar* project, Navjot Altaf got involved in the building of what she terms the *Pilli Gudi*, consisting of architectural structures designed as safe playing spaces for children outside school hours. Identified as *Children's Temples,* these were unlike traditional temples in that they were secular spaces. They thus provided a space where children of all castes and religious backgrounds could converge. Regarding these diverse projects, Grant Kester states that Navjot "worked closely with local craftspeople in all of these projects, and that constitutes another revealing layer: rather than

[168] The *Adivasi* communities are amongst the most socially and economically marginalised populations in India

treating ‘craft’ as something abject or naïve, she was able to recognize its complex material and symbolic function in village life” (Kester, 2013, p. 122).

What is unquestionable is that Navjot Altaf played on the powerfully decisive results that these communal projects had in disrupting prejudice and effectively breaking down deeply entrenched cultural prejudice towards Adivasi groups by non Adivasi people. This was achieved through the collaborative interactions between artists and villagers of different communities working on these projects which served the common welfare of the whole village. Navjot states in her own words,

> It encourages a communication network among artists from different cultures and disciplines, both within the area and outside, and with and among the young. These cross-cultural exchanges lead the young to think about different ways of knowing and modes of working, enabling them to draw nourishment and sustenance from difference and similarities (Altaf, as cited in Kester, 2005, p. 31).

Efforts such as those realized by Meera Mukherjee and Navjot Altaf, which lead to interactions between the diverse ethnic groups within communities and villages, are clearly crucial to the recasting of identities, especially of the most marginalized populations such as the *Adivasi* and *Dalit* people. Altaf’s projects are particularly important in the face of rising right wing fundamentalism in India. This has, over the last decade, insistently sought to repress and minimise the

voices and particular histories of non-Hindu or discriminated groups such as the Dalit and Adivasi; going so far as to redesign the educational system with the intent to invisibilize cultural differences.

The above are clear-cut examples of some of the positive and empowering repercussions on rural societies, instigated by the elite artists of the urban metropolis. Meanwhile, the work of artists like Nalini Malani, the community activism of Jasmeen Patheja's *Blank Noise* project and *Priya's Shakti*, amongst the other oeuvres collected in this study in **Part 6**, have been specifically chosen for the validity and effectiveness of the intent of the artists and groups; in their aim to disrupt disempowering patriarchal structures and install progressive change.

However, the true extent or range of effectiveness of contemporary art practices in offering progressive alternatives to the lives of the vast majority of Indian women does not offer a clearly optimistic picture. There have been numerous examples of women claiming new agency, as seen in the diverse movements in the cities as well as amongst rural and indigenous communities. However, the real reach of politically powered or feminist art work by privileged elite women artists in India is also mostly limited to elite consumers and collectors, elite curators within elite gallery spaces in India and abroad. These in turn create elite academic discourse that is masticated and consumed amongst elite intellectuals and equally elite students.

Consequently, these highly educated fully empowered women and men are also ultimately the only people to receive and understand the elite language of art

theory and criticism that is being engendered by contemporary art practices. As such, in no manner do these art practices ever actually touch the lives of the common people in the street; unless the elite individuals in question actually choose to take a decisive step in the direction of eliminating the class barriers so as to actually conjoin their art practices in some way or another with the common people.

Regarding the main aim of this thesis which was to carry out an appraisal of the changing status of women in India, by examining how the creative pursuits of contemporary and traditional art practices by mainstream and rural women artists might be addressing questions of empowerment and leading to cultural advancement and reformist outcomes, we can draw the following conclusions.

Clearly, the activities of the reformist, nationalist and women's movements previous and prior to independence, and consequent access to education resulted in major advances, and in many cases, a real change in status for women. These movements gave rise to a women intelligentsia with highly empowering results, particularly regarding the women of the elite upper classes and castes. These are the mothers, aunts and grandmothers of the women who make up the broad spectrum of highly empowered intellectuals, writers, artists, business women, media celebrities and professionals of all sectors, in other words, the outstandingly influential women in India today.

However, the currently ongoing position of women from disadvantaged populations and castes raises questions regarding the focus, emphasis or even recognition that different movements and activism have offered to the issues of caste discrimination and its influence on women's status. What is a known fact is that the caste system is deeply entrenched in Indian culture, living and breathing amongst the people in every crook and canny of society. It has survived for

centuries, successfully persisting through wars, political and social cataclysms as well as thwarting constitutional amendments which were specifically meant to overcome caste constructed biases and discrimination. The caste system is complex, but the four *Varnas* – which are the most common system of caste classification, historically based on occupation, colour and origin – are made up of what were originally the *Brahmans* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (merchants and farmers), and *Sudras* (scavengers). The *Untouchables* were people who fell out of any of these classifications.[169]

Over the decades women's movements have emerged that have appeared to include caste based issues in their agenda. However, it would appear they are also equally short lived or ineffectual even while including women from the marginalised castes amongst their members. Organisations such as the *All India Dalit Women's Forum* and the *National Federation of Dalit Women,* which were established in the 1990s, seem to have been, in many cases, almost powerless to effect far reaching change. Despite victories in the form of protective laws and enactments, and the appearance of educated Dalit women, Dalit issues in the media, in music, Dalit biographies or similar; in the face of limited political or economic leverage, Dalit women continue, in the majority of instances, to be bound within the restrictive and violent straits of oppression and discrimination,

[169] See: https://asiasociety.org/education/jati-caste-system-india

directly linked to their castes and gender. Progressive laws have in no manner resulted in progressive cultural norms.[170]

We have seen that the decades following independence have been increasingly marked by privileged Indian women artists' powerful entrance into the mainstream art world, many through the *Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda*. This was one of the major liberal institutions where several pioneering women artists first found their voices. Since those early beginnings, contemporary art practice in India, particularly by privileged urban women, has expanded exponentially and broken with barriers, disrupting what were traditionally dominant positions, to include critical voices and practices that increasingly challenge gender discrimination, violence, caste, class and cultural dominance as well as issues of displacement and migration; through a rich and wide variety of media.

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[170] See: https://www.hrw.org/report/1999/03/01/broken-people/caste-violence-against-indias-untouchables
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/17/world/asia/tell-everyone-we-scalped-you-how-caste-still-rules-in-india.html
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/RuralWomen/FEDONavsarjanTrustIDS.pdf
https://feminisminindia.com/2017/04/18/six-books-dalit-women-writers/

Today, despite the parity gap in the prices of artworks made by men and women artists in India, elite women artists' work sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars, in some cases even bringing in over a million dollars. In 2008, Shilpa Gupta's *'Untitled' C-print on canvas* was sold for 50,000 US dollars at auctions in both Christie's and Sotheby's. Bharti Kher's well-known installation piece titled *The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own*, created in 2006, was first auctioned and sold by Sotheby's London for 1.5 million US dollars and later resold, in May 2013, by Christie's New York for 1.785 Million US dollars. . The same year as Kher's first millionaire sale, in 2010, Arpita Singh's *Wish Dream* was sold at a Saffronart auction for 2.24 million US dollars.[171] Arpita Singh (1937) lives in New Delhi, Bharti Kher (1969) lives in Gurgaon, a city just southwest of New Delhi and Shilpa Gupta (1976) lives in Mumbai.

With a population of 1.34 billion and an average income of 2,020 dollars per annum, India is positioned 67th out of seventy seven countries, in the world's average income per annum rating.[172] The disparity in earnings between the richest and the poorest in India is nothing short of shocking and one could argue, even immoral. Clearly, today, Indian women in the arts occupy diverse positions,

[171] See: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/world/asia/01iht-letter01.html https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/india-s-8-most-expensive-contemporary-artists/

[172] See: https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php

varying from art historians and critics, curators and writers to academics, museum managers and more. Within these diverse roles and as artists, they have explored and challenged modernist and traditionalist trends, creating and moulding new identities within frameworks that, in some cases, allow for visibility and empowerment amongst both so called *mainstream* and vernacular or folk artists. More and more artists are also working across diverse media and media technologies, often also making subversive usage of social and digital media.

However, what also stands out disturbingly clear is that the vast majority of these highly successful artists and women in the arts continue to hail from originally highly advantaged backgrounds. We are not therefore seeing major progress in terms of upward mobility across classes. Simply bearing in mind the vastly enormous socioeconomic differences of the Indian people, without even considering other polarising factors, what is clear is that the true and effective reach of the voices of privileged women artists in their objective of effective disruption of prejudicial cultural expectations remains unresolved.

There is a dire need for powerful initiatives which involve socially and economically advantaged women in the arts actually stepping into the domain of the common women. There is also the clear necessity and responsibility of adopting practices and narratives that connect with the masses, in the effort to effectively alter behaviour stemming from patriarchal and deep-seated damaging culture. Amongst the most problematic issues afflicting Indian society is the problem of gender violence. This is of course directly responsible for the

continuous disempowerment of women that has survived despite modernisation and legislator reforms.[173] A significant increase in non-elitist collaborative artistic action by elite women in the arts within the space occupied by masses is called for. This could add to the possibility of perceivable shifts towards non-discriminatory culture, which would in turn prove highly beneficial to the extremely *poor* and less privileged women.

On a positive note, as we have seen previously, the recognition and theorizing of vernacular art has led to numerous initiatives funded by both private non-governmental organisations as well as governmental institutions. These are not only keeping traditional art practices alive but are directly benefitting women from rural communities. They are permitting many vernacular women artists to sell their work and make livelihoods, establish small businesses as well as share their skills with the younger generations. Such initiatives have proved beneficial for women as well as whole communities.[174]

Women in India continue to claim their agency. There are more and more opportunities of access to education at primary, secondary and higher education levels. The *Indian Department for School Education and Literacy* (DSEL) government initiative, under the name of *Saakshar Bharat Mission,* – alongside

[173] See also: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2132324 https://ssrn.com/abstract=2132324

[174] See: https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/india-nepal-mithila-art-feminism

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning – was set up in September 2009 with the objective of increasing adult and specifically women's literacy. By 2011, the census for literacy placed women at 65.46, and increase of 9.2% since 2001.

Although women's literacy rates continues to lag far behind men's at 82.14%, the program is ambitious and positive with its aim of reducing the literacy gap and achieving an overall national literacy rate of 80%. The objective is to provide basic literacy skills to a further 70 million people out of whom 60 million will be women (2016). The mission was highly publicised, most markedly in a promotional video that included celebrity Bollywood personalities and an accompanying theme.

Undoubtedly, as has been made clear in this study, there are numerous challenges remaining and true empowerment for the vast majority of women in India is nowhere in sight. It remains what may be described as a terribly bumpy ride.[175] Issues that need to be targeted have not varied over time: poverty, domestic violence, education, health care, gender bias in employment and salaries. These are further exacerbated by entrenched cultural and religious maladies such as caste discrimination; all of which remain unresolved at a massive level. In what are unmistakably challenging times ahead, both women and men have no

[175] See: https://idronline.org/the-development-discourse-in-india-neglects-women/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA-bjyBRCcARIsAFboWg3BNF692EUFzu-xV-hwrfNRdK0YhzoognB4QN1EUFwfoo-bORoPoREaAiM-EALw_wcB

choice but to continue the fight, and maintain faith in the people's capacity to *Educate, Organise and Agitate*, as the father of India's constitution, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar – fondly hailed as *Babasaheb* Ambedkar – so vehemently insisted.

Other areas within the research interest of this thesis which could benefit from in-depth studies might be, for example, an assessment of the impact on Indian society of gender representations within mass media, not necessarily exclusive to films and television programmes, although these are unquestionably the most consumed form of mass media. Additionally, studies could examine how to increase impact and effectively make use of alternative, subversive representations with the aim of disrupting discriminatory culture.

The *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media* carried out a couple of brief studies that point not only to distorted gender roles that are often reinforced in mass media, but also to the fact that mass media does not always reach the impoverished and marginalized classes who are also mostly the lower castes and minority ethnic groups.[176] Obviously, this fact is yet another stumbling block to empowerment for these groups, an additional disenfranchising structure

[176] See: https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-without-borders-full-report.pdf

eejane.org/wp-content/uploads/cinema-and-society-investigation-of-the-impact-on-gender-representation-in-indian-films.pdf

contributing to suppression. The studies proved interesting, within their limitations, which were amongst others, that the size of the study carried out in India was far too small to be representative and it unintentionally only included participants that were educated and middleclass. The development of practical proposals and realistic initiatives capable of resolving the poor access to mass media suffered by rural populations would be laudable. Some studies addressing this issue have been carried out and are ongoing, but they are by no means exhaustive.

Alternative narratives within Indian cinema and media that are capable of provoking disruptions in traditional culture are not lacking. However, they suffer a losing battle, in terms of influential rivalry, to Bollywood's overriding, one-sided romanticised narratives; not to mention an enormously limited viewership caused not only by the dominance of Bollywood films, but also due to policing and censorship by the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (Devasundaram, 2017). Some of these films are uploaded by their creators to YouTube or other similar platforms, allowing them to reach a discerning and interested albeit middle or upper-class public, both in India and abroad.

Another area of study of tangible interest could be a focus on the development of measures with which to achieve successful implementation of far reaching eco-feminism projects in rural areas around the country. These are projects which could possibly lead to the truly subversive changes of attitude towards baby girls and women in disadvantaged populations that India so direly

needs. Privileged contemporary women artists' involvement in designing and applying such endeavours could prove decisive. An example of such a project is to be seen in the remote village of *Piplantri* in the northwest state of Rajasthan.

Piplantri used to be an impoverished and arid village, suffering from industrial pollution due to the surrounding marble factories; water scarcity, lack of electricity, illiteracy as well as a whole host of cultural maladies such as high crime, child marriage, female foeticide and similar problems which often accompany impoverished populations. In 2006, the then village head of Piplantri, Shyam Sunder Paliwal, lost his 16 year old daughter. His move was to plant a burflower tree – *Kadam*, in Hindi – in her memory. From then onwards, Paliwal decided that every girl child's birth would be celebrated rather than mourned – as is often customary in India – by planting one hundred and eleven tree saplings.

The planting is accompanied by the collection for the baby girl's family, through village donations, of 31,000 rupees, the equivalent of approximately 400 euros or 430 US dollars at current exchange rates. The money is deposited in a trust for the baby girl, to be used towards her education, *dowry* or both. The parents plant a hundred and eleven tree saplings for every daughter born and also pledge to nurture and care for the saplings and their daughter, to enrol her in school and only permit her marriage after the age of eighteen.

In 2016, encouraged by a perceptible reversing of the appalling imbalance in girl-boy population ratios prevalent in the region, – the Rajasthani government has been trying to actively combat female foeticide since a damning report

released in 2011[177] – the Rajasthani government established an economic reward system in Piplantri, as a model, in the hope that other Rajasthani villages would follow the Piplantri example. Families are to be paid a series of fixed amounts at the completion of different milestones in girl babies and children's lives.

At birth and on her first birthday the families are paid 2,500 rupees each, the equivalent of 32 euros or 35 dollars at current exchange rates. This might seem like a small amount, but for the impoverished populations of rural Rajasthan, the figure is significant. The family is paid a further 5,000 rupees when the girl finishes the equivalent of primary education and the neat sum of 35,000 rupees on completion of secondary education. Thus, the total amount a family receives in Piplantri for cherishing and educating a daughter is 50,000 rupees – the equivalent of approximately 645 euros or 695 dollars – by the time the daughter is about seventeen or eighteen years of age. "These benefits stop a girl from being seen as a liability," (Pankaj Gaur, as cited in Dhillon, 2018, para. 17).

In the 2011 census, – the last census currently available – Piplantri had a population of 497 with a male to female children ratio of 42 to 30, showing an improving tendency in the gender ratios as compared to other regions of India.

[177] See: https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/rajasthan.html

The overall literacy levels in Piplantri were also higher than other villages in Rajasthan at 81.9% compared to 53.5% in neighbouring villages.[178]

Piplantri provides what one hopes could be an optimistic example of the power that ecofeminism could wield in transforming culture. Piplantri's example also provides a model of respect and environmental sustainability, well worth emulating. The Piplantri project appears to have brought about a profound altering of attitudes towards girl babies and women in the village, as testimonies of the villagers seem to demonstrate. This has also led to a perceptible descent in crime rates; although I have not managed to find any records regarding whether this decline has been noted specifically in crimes committed against women.[179]

Admittedly, the true extent and significance of the cultural transformation and empowering features of the Piplantri project cannot yet be correctly assessed, as the girls who were born at the start of the project are just turning fourteen and fifteen. However, the real possibility that some of these confident young women with completed primary and secondary educations might choose to continue their formation and begin to assume decision making roles; that they might grow up empowered, into pacemakers and leaders, offers an enticing picture of a future

[178] See: https://www.censusindia.co.in/villages/piplantri-khurd-population-rajsamand-rajasthan-97085

[179] See: Theguardian.com/global-development/2018/oct/11/my-daughters-memory-indian-village-where-every-girls-life-is-celebrated-trees-planted-piplantri-rajasthan

that is not only possible but wholly desirable. As the eminent humanitarian economist, Devaki Jain puts it:

> The fact that there is a whole generation of people like you, who have identified yourselves with feminism, which has meant self-strengthening and participation, is a fire that I would like to grow bigger. Feminism has a moral edge. It fights for justice for all, for men and for women. I find that we are full of fire. So now, not only because there is an economic crisis, but because there is a lot of disturbance and divisions in our countries, feminism can be like a torch that recalls what human beings really want: A just world, and an inclusive world. We fight for that.

Devaki Jain, 2014.
In conversation with Helen Thomas.

APPENDIX

A sample from the list of Manu's laws drawn up by Hirday N. Patwari, on the *Nirmukta* website, demonstrate the tight rein on women's social and legal independence that was exercised, the clear intent to establish women's status as immoral, inferior and subordinate to husbands, and the requirement that consequently, women themselves be the ones to exercise absolute self-control on their own movements and socialising.[180]

1. *"Swabhav ev narinam… " – 2/213.* It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females.

2. *"Avidvam samlam…" – 2/214.* Women, true to their class character, are capable of leading astray men in this world, not only a fool but even a learned and wise man. Both become slaves of desire.

3. *"Matra swastra… " – 2/215.* Wise people should avoid sitting alone with one's mother, daughter or sister. Since carnal desire is always strong, it can lead to temptation.

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[180] See also Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and Brian K. Smith's translation, *The Laws of Manu*.

4. *"Naudwahay…." – 3/8.* One should not marry women who have reddish hair, redundant parts of the body [such as six fingers], one who is often sick, one without hair or having excessive hair and one who has red eyes.

7. *"Uchayangh…" – 3/11.* Wise men should marry only women who are free from bodily defects, with beautiful names, grace/gait like an elephant, moderate hair on the head and body, soft limbs and small teeth.

8. *"Shudr-aiv bharya…" – 3/12.*Brahman men can marry Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaish and even Shudra women but Shudra men can marry only Shudra women

9. *"Na Brahman kshatriya..." – 3/14.* Although Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaish men have been allowed inter-caste marriages, even in distress they should not marry Shudra women.

10. "*Heenjati striyam…" – 3/15*. When twice born [dwij=Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaish] men in their folly marry low caste Shudra women, they are responsible for the degradation of their whole family. Accordingly, their children adopt all the demerits of the Shudra caste.

14. *"Na ashniyat…" – 4/43.* A Brahman, true defender of his class, should not have his meals in the company of his wife and even avoid looking at her. Furthermore, he should not look towards her when she is having her meals or when she sneezes/yawns.

17. "*Balya va…." – 5/150.* A female child, young woman or old woman is not supposed to work independently even at her place of residence.

18. *"Balye pitorvashay…" – 5/151.* Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently.

19. *"Asheela kamvrto…" – 5/157.* Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands.

20. *"Na ast strinam…" – 5/158.* Women have no divine right to perform any religious ritual, nor make vows or observe a fast. Her only duty is to obey and please her husband and she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven. *21.* 21. *"Kamam to…" – 5/160.* At her pleasure [after the death of her husband], let her emaciate her body by living only on pure flowers, roots of vegetables and fruits. She must not even mention the name of any other men after her husband has died.

22. *"Vyabhacharay…" – 5/167.* Any woman violating duty and code of conduct towards her husband, is disgraced and becomes a patient of leprosy. After death, she enters womb of Jackal.

23. *"Kanyam bhajanti…." – 8/364.* In case women enjoy sex with a man from a higher caste, the act is not punishable. But on the contrary, if women enjoy sex with lower caste men, she is to be punished and kept in isolation.

24. *"Utmam sevmansto…" – 8/365.* In case a man from a lower caste enjoys sex with a woman from a higher caste, the person in question is to be

awarded the death sentence. And if a person satisfies his carnal desire with women of his own caste, he should be asked to pay compensation to the women's faith.

25. *"Ya to kanya…"* – 8/369. In case a woman tears the membrane [hymen] of her Vagina, she shall instantly have her head shaved or two fingers cut off and made to ride on Donkey.

26. *"Bhartaram…" – 8/370. In case a women, proud of the greatness of her excellence or her relatives, violates her duty towards her husband, the King shall arrange to have her thrown before dogs at a public place.*

27. *"Pita rakhshati…" – 9/3.* Since women are not capable of living independently, she is to be kept under the custody of her father as child, under her husband as a woman and under her son as widow.

28. *"Imam hi sarw…." – 9/6.* It is the duty of all husbands to exert total control over their wives. Even physically weak husbands must strive to control their wives.

33. *"Na asti strinam…" – 9/18.* While performing namkarm and jatkarm, Vedic mantras are not to be recited by women, because women are lacking in strength and knowledge of Vedic texts. Women are impure and represent falsehood.

36. *"Yatha vidy…" – 9/70.* In accordance with established law, the sister-in-law [bhabhi] must be clad in white garments; with pure intent her brother-in-law [devar] will cohabitate with her until she conceives.

37. *"Ati kramay… – 9/77.* Any women who disobey orders of her lethargic, alcoholic and diseased husband shall be deserted for three months and be deprived of her ornaments.

38. *"Vandyashtamay…" – 9/80.* A barren wife may be superseded in the 8th year; she whose children die may be superseded in the 10th year and she who bears only daughters may be superseded in the 11th year; but she who is quarrelsome may be superseded without delay.

39. *"Trinsha…" – 9/93.* In case of any problem in performing religious rites, males between the age of 24 and 30 should marry a female between the age of 8 and 12 (Patwari, 2011).

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